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★★★★★ REVIEW OF AN OFFICER'S VOW

A BACHELOR'S *P*LEDGE

PENNY HAMPSON

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Chapter 1



‘HELL AND DAMNATION!’ PHIL cursed under his breath as he went up the stairs two at a time. He hadn’t planned on this foray up to the servants’ quarters of the brothel – hadn’t been keen to come at all if the truth be known. This wasn’t the sort of place he normally frequented of an evening; a coffee house or a scientific lecture was more his sort of thing. He was only here to protect Richard, who’d come to meet an informer. Now Richard had departed, and he was on his own... trying to help some chit who might not require his assistance after all. He’d seen her earlier when they’d arrived, being berated by the bitch who ran the place, Ruth Newbody. One glimpse of that pale, frightened face and he knew he’d have to do something. He’d never sleep again if he ignored his gut instincts and abandoned her to her fate. He’d delayed once before and look how badly that had turned out.

The whole place reeked of evil – he’d sensed it from the moment he’d crossed the threshold. The smell of tallow in the air told him that the brothel’s luxurious appointments ended at the first floor – no fine wax candles for the living quarters of the girls who worked here. And that Mrs Newbody... Her sly words and knowing glances had sent his skin crawling. He wondered what sort of men paid to spend time here. From the glimpses he’d seen, her girls – finely dressed though they were – possessed eyes that were dead and had painted smiles as empty as the endearments they uttered.

Phil reached the top stair and looked down the dark corridor, its bare floorboards stretching out before him. It had been twenty minutes or so since he’d seen the girl, surely not time enough for her to don the gaudy finery and paint her face to the levels expected of a high-class whore? He listened. From downstairs, the braying of the aristocratic ne’er-do-wells who frequented the place, coupled with the high-pitched squeals of the house’s females, floated up to his ears. But there was something else. He tiptoed a few steps down the hallway and strained his ears. There it was again – the sound of a woman’s stifled sobbing. A sound that tore at his soul.

He headed for the door he’d identified as the source of the noise and tapped on it. Silence. Then came muffled sounds of something being dragged across floorboards.

Frustrated, for there wasn’t much time, he tapped again.

‘Come in,’ a quavering voice called out, unmistakably female.

He turned the handle and stepped inside, his eyes taking a second to adjust to

the gloom. A single lit candle was the only illumination in the garret. Two small beds stood next to each other with a flimsy table between, holding a ewer, a bowl, and a hairbrush. Crouching beside one bed was the young woman he'd seen earlier. From the look on her face, he was the last person she was expecting to see.

Springing to her feet, she eyed him nervously. 'Who...?' The word came out as a croak. She swallowed and started again. 'Gentlemen are not to come up here. You need the floor below, sir.'

Her voice was surprisingly cultured. He knew he had to be careful, seeing her anxious eyes flicker to whatever she'd just pushed under her bed. She was as nervous as a cat, even though she was doing her best to look calm, standing stock-still with her hands locked together.

'It was you I came to see,' he said.

A look of fear flashed across her face. 'But I'm not... I mean... I must get changed. I will meet you downstairs, sir.' She gestured towards the poor furnishings. 'This room is not fit for' – there was a pause, no doubt as she struggled to find suitable words to describe the activity she thought he required – 'entertaining gentlemen. There are far nicer rooms below.' A rigid smile formed on her lips.

'I don't require entertainment.' He needed to make her understand, and quickly, his words coming out more brusquely than he'd intended. 'I want you to come with me.'

The young woman's eyes widened, and she took a step back.

'It's not what you think,' he hissed. 'If you wish to leave this place and remain unmolested, I beg that you come with me. I mean you no harm, miss.' He stretched out his arm to her, and again she retreated. *Damn*. Everything he said and did was making her more nervous. That's what came of having no sisters – he'd no idea how best to calm her fears. He took a breath and tried again. 'Mrs Newbody does not look after her girls. I'm only trying—'

'What?' her voice rasped accusingly. 'You came here with your friend. If you do not leave, I shall... I shall...' Her eyes cast about the room, as if seeking a weapon. For a little slip of a thing, she was brave.

'Scream?' he asked, suppressing the smile that rose to his lips. 'Look, I meant what I said. I mean you no harm. But if you wish to leave this place, I can help you, take you back to your family.'

'I have no family.'

Jolted by the bitterness of her tone, he asked, 'Did Mrs Newbody trick you into coming here?'

The girl nodded. 'She told me I would be a lady's companion. I knew she was lying as soon as I got here, and I tried to escape. But to no avail.' Her shoulders slumped. 'She has this place too well guarded. I was hauled back before I'd

reached the bottom of the stairs.’ Pointing to the skylight, she added, ‘I even tried going that way, but I discovered I do not have a head for heights.’ There was a sigh. ‘At least Mrs Newbody didn’t force me to join the other girls straightaway. Said she’d give me some time to get used to the idea.’ With a look of disgust, the girl indicated the crumpled red silk garment on the bed. ‘But tonight she expects me to don that and join the others downstairs.’ Her gaze swung up to meet his, anger flashing in her eyes. ‘And that is something I will never do. I’ll take my chances on the leads. If small boys can climb chimneys, I’m sure I can manage.’

Phil’s mind raced. He had to convince the chit to come away with him and not attempt the rooftop escape she had in mind.

‘Well, if you wish to avoid the life that Mrs Newbody intends for you, come away with me now. We can get out using a less risky route than the one you’d planned, but we must hurry.’

She shot him a suspicious look. ‘Why? What are you offering? How do I know you don’t have something worse in mind?’

‘I came here with a friend to talk to an associate of Mrs Newbody’s, not to purchase one of her girls for the night. I saw her threaten you. Saw the fear in your face. I want to help. I pledge on my honour as a gentleman, I’ll not harm you. Nor will I let any harm come to you.’

At that moment, the braying of the “gentlemen” from the floor below grew momentarily louder, making his words sound particularly hollow. Why should she believe him? he asked himself. *Damn it.* In her place, he’d be suspicious.

Then it came to him. ‘Look. I’ll give you this.’ He pulled his leather purse from the pocket of his greatcoat. It was heavy with coins. ‘You can keep this whether you decide to stay with me once we get out of here or not. If you decide to go it alone, at least you will have something to start with.’ He thrust the purse towards her.

Her mouth opened, revealing even, white teeth. ‘Oh.’ But still she didn’t move.

He dropped the purse on the bed and turned back to the door, satisfied that at least he’d tried his best. As his hand reached for the handle, he heard her voice.

‘Yes... I’ll come with you. The leads are slippery, and it’s a long way to the ground.’

‘Good girl.’ Relief swept through him as he turned to face her. ‘We need to be quick. Do you have a bag you can pack?’

The girl slumped to her knees, fumbling for something under the bed, which turned out to be a small, battered leather valise.

‘I... I was trying to summon up the courage to go just before you came in... only I didn’t think I’d be able to carry this over the roof. There are things that I do not wish to leave behind.’ She swept the hairbrush off the table and stuffed it in with the rest of her belongings. On the point of closing it, her hand paused, and she looked up at him. ‘There’s something else.’

‘Whatever it is, hurry up.’ They couldn’t afford to delay much longer.

She fell to her knees again and started to prise up a panel of floorboard. Phil watched as a small wooden box emerged from its secret hiding place.

As if hearing his unspoken question, she said, ‘The only thing I have to remind me of my parents.’ The box went into the valise, which was snapped shut.

‘Do you have a cloak? It’s not very warm outside.’ Phil could see that the shabby, patched dress she wore would not be sufficient to keep out the evening chill.

‘No. Mrs Newbody took my outdoor things. I only have what I’m wearing – and that.’ There was another scornful look at the lurid garment on the bed.

‘Never mind. Once we’re outside, you can have my coat until we can get something more suitable. Now come on, before Newbody sends someone for you.’

Phil poked his head out of the door. Thankfully, the corridor was deserted, and he beckoned the girl to follow him. Pausing at the top of the stairs, he turned and plucked the valise from her hands.

‘I’ll carry this for now. Do you think you can lead me to the back door without us being seen?’

She nodded. ‘The kitchen will be busy, so they shouldn’t notice us if we’re quick. It’s the yard that might be a problem. The doormen go there for a smoke; they take it in turns.’ Seeing his questioning look, she added, ‘There’s only two of them, but they’re big chaps. And there’s Fred and Jimmy, two youngsters who run errands for her, but they’re usually in the kitchen at this time, trying for scraps.’

Phil didn’t like the sound of the doormen. He’d seen one of them when he’d entered the place. The chap resembled an ox. Still, there was the pistol in his pocket... He patted the reassuring bulge in his greatcoat and hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

He tugged her forward by the arm. This was no time for perfect manners.

‘I’ll lead the way till we get downstairs, then you show me the door to the yard.’ He didn’t even know her name, and it was too late to ask now – far too risky that someone might overhear. He had other questions too. Why had Mrs Newbody not forced this girl? The woman who ran the brothel had struck him as a ruthless sort, not one to indulge her victims. But that also was a puzzle for another time.

Tense minutes later, they were downstairs in the yard. It was all in darkness – and, even better, it was deserted. No sign of either doorman. Phil started to feel optimistic. Perhaps their luck would hold, and they’d get clear away. In the gloom, he spotted the gateway to the mews and alleyway outside.

‘Come on. Stay close,’ he said, wrapping an arm around his companion’s shoulder. After an instant’s hesitation she moved, and together they skirted the sides of the yard. They’d nearly reached the gate when he felt her stagger. The cobbles were slick with recent rain.

‘Steady. I’ve got you.’ He clasped her until she’d steadied herself, hearing her quick panicked breaths and catching the faintest hint of jasmine.

‘I’m fine. My shoe caught, that’s all.’ The girl pulled away from him. ‘I can hear voices coming this way. Lord, what shall we do?’

There was nothing for it. Niceties be damned. He grabbed her arm. Ignoring her squeaked protest, he shoved the girl in front of him, enfolding her inside his coat.

‘Here’s the gate. Quickly, move.’ The bolt made an ear-splitting sound as he pulled it back, almost loud enough to wake the dead. Then, with a flick of his finger, the latch was lifted. He shoved the girl through the opening.

‘Ho! Who goes there?’ A gruff voice sounded from the open doorway across the yard. Phil held his nerve and turned to face the chap who’d issued the challenge. If they got in a chase now, their chances of getting away would dwindle to nothing.

Phil didn’t fancy engaging in fisticuffs, and certainly not with the enormous chap he’d seen at the brothel’s front door. That one had looked as if he’d be far too handy with his fives. Perhaps convincing the doorman that he was hopelessly lost and in his cups would work. Subterfuge often worked better than violence when it came to achieving one’s ends.

‘Sh-sh-shorry, mate. In the wrong yard, don’t you know? Thought it seemed... diff-diff-different.’ Phil swayed about and started to stagger towards his questioner.

Before he got two steps, there was a growled response. ‘Gerraway with yer, afore I draw your claret.’

Phil turned unsteadily and returned to the gate, grateful that the yard’s custodian couldn’t be bothered to follow up on his threat. Once outside, he straightened up and peered around. There was no sign of the girl. Where the hell had she gone? His eyes caught the movement of passers-by at one end of the alleyway, and he frowned. Could she have reached the street already? There was a sudden tug on his sleeve. He looked down and saw a huddled figure crouching in the shadows.

‘I’m here,’ she whispered. ‘I didn’t know which way to go.’

‘Come. Put this round you.’ He shrugged off his coat and placed it over her shoulders. ‘We must pretend to be lovers, so no-one will look twice. Let me put my arm around you, and we’ll head this way.’ He was aware his words might alarm her, but he couldn’t think of another way to escape notice. Her body tensed as he placed his arm around her, but she didn’t pull away.

The damp cobbles made walking unsteady, but they reached the end of the alleyway without further mishap. Phil halted before proceeding into the throng, scanning the crowd for signs of danger. Carriages rolled past, stopping briefly to disgorge their passengers – mostly well-dressed men heading for their clubs or

other establishments like the one he and his companion had just left. A few bold members of the demi-monde strolled arm in arm, calling out to potential clients. 'Looking for some fun, my lords?'

Phil quickly glanced at his companion. Her face was a picture of horror and apprehension. At last, a hackney approached, and he raised his hand. Minutes later, they were seated within the vehicle's shabby confines and on their way to his rented house.



Sophia kept her eyes on her hands, which were clenched in her lap – she dared not look at the face of the man who sat next to her for fear of what she might see there. Despite him helping her to escape from that awful place, there was still a sliver of doubt in her mind about his intentions. Indeed, how could she ever trust anyone again? The so-called gentlemen who patronised the brothel, full of false smiles and pretty inducements, had been easy to ignore. But Ruth Newbody had turned up at her guardian's house – a distinguished acquaintance to all intents and purposes. How was she to know that Ruth's promises of respectable employment were false?

What a nincompoop she'd been to believe that woman's lies. And tonight it had been made clear what her future would be. Lady's companion indeed! Ruth had intended her to join her stable of girls from the start. The only wonder was that she hadn't been forced straightaway. Something she couldn't quite fathom. Now this gentleman, plausible and glib, offering her money and telling her that he would help her. What was his game?

There hadn't been a chance to get more than a glimpse of his face. All she had was the impression of a tall, well-built figure with dark hair and strong but gentle fingers. Close to, he'd smelt of clean linen. His cultured baritone voice held a slight burr that she couldn't quite place. Importantly, he hadn't groped her when he'd had the opportunity, unlike some of the brothel's patrons who sometimes managed to wander from the public rooms. That was why she'd stayed at his side. And once she'd seen the streets filled with drunken, lecherous fools and more girls like those she'd recently become acquainted with, she'd known she wouldn't get far on her own. If she could only hang on to her nerve and pretend she wasn't as terrified as she felt.

'You'll be more comfortable if you sit further back. You look like a terrified sparrow, perched there on the edge.' His voice cut through the silence, and she jerked her head up to look at him. It was no good. In the gloomy interior, she still couldn't make out his features.

'I'm Philip Cullen, by the way,' he continued. 'May I know your name, miss?'

He was polite – she'd give him that. 'Hart... Sophia Hart.' It was the first name that came into her head. 'Where are we going, Mr Cullen?'

He settled back into his seat and lifted the leather curtain covering the grimy window to peer out before answering. 'I have a house not far from here. I thought it would be safe to take you there.'

She stiffened, her pulse quickening in fear, until he added, 'I have a housekeeper – Mrs Dobson. She will be able to see to your needs until we can decide what is to be done.'

At least that implied she would have a part in deciding her own future – a power she was determined not to relinquish from now on. Her hands slowly unclenched.

'Why are you helping me, Mr Cullen?'

'No particular reason, Miss Hart.' He cleared his throat. 'As I said earlier, I saw you with that woman. She looked as if she was threatening you.' He paused. 'I thought perhaps you did not really wish to be there.'

As an answer, it did not explain why he'd risk a beating to rescue someone he didn't know. But he had risked a beating, she told herself, the coil of tension in her insides slowly relaxing.

'You're correct. I did not want to be there.'

He shifted in his seat, increasing the space between them. Something else that moved him up a notch in her estimation.

'Where are you from, Miss Hart? I do not detect a London accent.'

So he was uncomfortable discussing his motives, hence this change of subject. She decided to indulge his curiosity. 'Quite right, sir. I was not brought up here. Up until a short time ago I was living in Oxfordshire, in a small village not far from Oxford itself.'

'Does your family live there, Miss Hart?'

'I've told you that I have no family.' Her words came out sharper than she intended. Why did she always fill with bitterness when family was mentioned? If only she could learn to curb her tongue. Besides, she did not want to be lulled into giving him too much information. Not until she was surer of him, at any rate. 'I apologise for my tone, sir. I did not mean...' She stopped herself from flinching as his hand patted hers.

'Don't apologise, Miss Hart. You are understandably overwrought. I shouldn't pry.' He removed his hand. For some reason, she now wished he hadn't. It had been an age since someone had shown her any sort of affection. And he'd helped her to escape from that awful place, a fact that she couldn't yet quite allow herself to believe.

'That is no excuse for being sharp with you, sir, especially as you have been so kind.'

He merely grunted.

They rode on in silence for several minutes longer, then Mr Cullen spoke as the hackney started to slow down. 'We are almost here. I'll hand you over to Mrs

Dobson, and I'll see you in the morning. Please don't worry about anything.'

The coach drew to a halt, and Mr Cullen jumped down and let out the steps for her. He tossed some coins up to the driver and led her up to the front door of the terraced house. A light showed through the fanlight over the door, indicating that someone was waiting for his return. Sophia tensed. Now she would know for sure whether his motives were pure. She readied herself to grab the valise he'd set down on the step while he fumbled his key in the lock. She wouldn't be able to outrun him, not in her flimsy shoes and draped in his oversized coat, but if she could make a racket, perhaps the Watch would come to her aid. Sophia bent forward, arm outstretched... and froze as the door was flung open and a woman's voice hailed her rescuer.

'Master Phil, there you are at last. Mr Lacey does make you keep such long hours. I'm sure he really can't expect you to go careering off every time he snaps his fingers...'

'Now, Mrs Dobson, that's enough. I'm out of leading strings, and I don't need you to tell me what I can do.' His words, though imperative, were spoken with warmth as he stepped into the hall. Sophia hid her smile at the housekeeper's loud sniff. Quelling her previous misgivings, she followed him in.

'I have a guest whom I wish you to look after, Mrs Dobson. I know I can rely on you.' Before the housekeeper could respond, he continued. 'I'm just going out again for a short while. Send Davy up to my room with some hot water, and once you've seen Miss Hart settled in the guest room, you may retire. Breakfast at the usual time, Mrs Dobson.'

The housekeeper sniffed again. 'Very well, sir. This way, miss.'

Sophia turned round to see Mr Cullen sweep out of the door. She still hadn't had a good look at his face. The valise sat on the floor where he'd placed it. Sophia moved over to collect it.

'Leave it, miss. I'll get Davy to bring it up.' The housekeeper eyed her up and down. Sophia shrank under her gaze. What would the woman think of her, in her shabby maid's clothes and a man's greatcoat? To her surprise, the woman's suspicious look softened into a smile. 'Spect you're another of his lost causes. Oh well, never mind. Come on then, don't dawdle. I want to get to my bed, and I expect you do, too.'

The housekeeper started up the stairs, and Sophia followed her, still not quite believing that she was safe. Everything had happened so quickly. One minute she'd been desperate enough to try the roof again and convinced that she would either end up as one of Newbody's stable or sleeping rough on the London streets, and the next, here she was in what appeared to be relative comfort with her virtue intact. Could she be dreaming? She rubbed at her eyes. Now that her terror had subsided, exhaustion had taken its place. She wanted only to lie down and close her eyes. Shadows flickered on the dark landing as she followed the light of

Mrs Dobson's candle, her own footsteps echoing on the wooden stairs. The woman opened a door and led the way into a small bedchamber, waving Sophia in as she set about lighting the candles on the nightstand. A hint of lavender and beeswax hung in the air, telling Sophia that the room had been recently cleaned. She'd wager that in the cold light of morning not a speck of dust would be visible on the dressing table or nightstand. Mrs Dobson looked the sort who would not permit dust to sully her master's home.

'I'll just pull the covers back. The bed was only aired yesterday, so you should be comfortable enough. I'll send Molly up with some hot water.'

'Don't worry, Mrs Dobson. I'll wash in the morning. I fear I will be unable to stay awake long enough to perform much of a toilette.' The bed looked so inviting that Sophia wanted to crawl straight in.

Mrs Dobson pulled a disapproving face. 'Molly will bring up hot water, miss, nevertheless. I'm not having the master say I did not do my duty to his guests.' She gave a cursory bob and swept out of the room, closing the door firmly behind her.

Sophia sank down in a chair near the window and put her chin in her hands. She was too tired to think. What she needed was a night's sleep, and hopefully in the morning she would know how to proceed. A tap sounded on the door, and before she could answer, it swung open. A young maid carrying a jug, followed by a sleepy-looking lad with her valise, trotted in.

'Set it down there, Davy, then off you go to bed,' instructed the lass. 'Here's some water, miss. It's not as hot as it should be, but Mrs Dobson said you would not mind. Do you need help to change, miss?'

'No, thank you... Molly, is it?'

The lass nodded.

'I can manage.'

'Very well, miss. I'll wish you goodnight if there is nothing else.' The girl stifled a yawn and Sophia, fighting her own urge to yawn loudly, nodded her dismissal. The door closed with a click, and she was on her own. With an effort, she undressed, wrinkling her nose at the stench of cheap perfume that clung to her clothes – the brothel's very air had tainted her with its aroma. She shook her dress out and hung it over the back of the chair, then did the same with her chemise. After taking the pins out of her hair and brushing it, she splashed her face with the now-tepid water. It felt good to wipe the grime off her face. Soon she was dressed in the simple nightgown that she'd packed in her valise, one of the few remnants of her previous life.

There was just one more thing she needed to do. She reached into her valise and pulled out the small wooden box. Gently lifting the lid, she gazed for a moment at the object lying within, then closed it again and tucked the box back into the valise. Satisfied, she crawled onto the bed, blew out the candle, and sank

into oblivion.

Chapter 2



PHIL WOKE UP EARLY – he'd always been an early riser. He scratched his head and frowned. What was he going to do about the female he'd rescued? What was her name again? Sophia... Hart. That's right. She'd mentioned Oxfordshire but said she had no family. He wondered about her history. Who had she been living with? She spoke well and didn't have the demeanour of a servant. What was her background, and why had Mrs Newbody not forced her straightaway to become part of her enterprise? That was the usual way of going about things... or so he'd heard. It ensured the girls so caught would not be able to return to their former lives, ruined forever. He gave up wondering and rang the bell for hot water and coffee. Time enough for questions later.

Washed and dressed, he went down to breakfast. Mrs Dobson came in as he was helping himself to coddled eggs and slices of bacon. He noted the dark shadows under her eyes and felt guilty. The woman was getting on in years.

'There you are, Mrs Dobson. I apologise for keeping you up so late last night.'

She shook her head. 'No, sir, you did not keep me up. I'd been doing an inventory of the larder and cellar. Took me longer than I expected. Besides, it's my duty to care for your guests.' The woman folded her arms across her chest, and by the look on her face, Phil guessed she was going to ask him something he did not want to answer.

Her mouth opened. 'About the young lady, sir?'

He was right. How could he explain the impulse to rescue the chit and bring her home? He knew why, of course. It was because in the past he'd failed to act as promptly, and that young lady's life – and her family's – had been ruined. He'd sworn it would never happen again. He returned Mrs Dobson's steady look with a steely one of his own. Perhaps if he looked intimidating enough, she would back down.

She didn't. 'I looked in on her earlier, sir. She is dead to the world. I would suggest she is left for another hour or so. She looked fair done in when I left her last night.'

Phil released a breath. That wasn't what he'd been expecting. He turned back to help himself to more bacon. 'I agree, Mrs Dobson. Let her rest for now.'

'By your leave, sir?'

'Yes?' His hand hovered over a dish of fried mackerel.

'I've had to dismiss that young chap Jack you took in last week, sir.'

Phil's head spun round. His housekeeper's mouth was fixed in a moue of

distaste. 'Found him in the cellar packing away bottles of your best port into a sack. Gave me a nasty turn, it did.'

'How did you...?'

'Oh, Jenkins gave me a hand to get rid of him, sir. He's a big, burly chap, so that scamp of a lad didn't put up a fight.' She paused, a hint of uncertainty shadowing her face. 'I took the liberty of not reporting him to the constable, if that's all right? Just let him go with a clout round the ear.'

Phil choked back a guffaw. 'Quite all right, Mrs Dobson. Sorry I was wrong about the lad and that he gave you a fright. No point in bringing the law into it. I daresay if he's that way inclined, the next person he wrongs will have the trouble of resorting to the law. He'll get his just deserts then.'

Mrs Dobson nodded, and her eyes flicked to the dish over which Phil's hand had returned. 'The mackerel is fresh this morning, sir. First of the season and straight from Brighton. Thought you might like it for a change.'

'Indeed. Very thoughtful of you, Mrs Dobson.' Phil turned back to his task and sighed when he heard the rustle of the housekeeper's dress and the click of the door as it closed behind her.



Phil, now in his study, re-read his uncle's letter. It had arrived a couple of days previously, and he still hadn't decided what to do about its contents. Yet another reason why he'd acted so impulsively last night – something to distract him and give him an excuse not to immediately return to Cornwall. His business here in London wasn't quite finished, and his orders had been quite explicit. He was to build up a circle of acquaintances and listen for any hints of sympathy for the French cause. His superiors at the War Office were concerned that Wellington and his troops would soon be evacuating Portugal, giving Bonaparte complete control of mainland Europe. How soon would it be before the Corsican turned his mind to the invasion of Britain again? It was a well-known fact that French agents were at large, recruiting sympathisers who would help when the time for invasion was right. The expected attack had been put off once some years ago when Napoleon had set his sights elsewhere, but now it was a dangerous possibility again.

Phil rubbed his chin as he perused the letter once more, trying to puzzle it out. Uncle Ralph had been happy enough for the past year or so to oversee the estate for him while he stayed on in London, but now Ralph seemed to be indicating that Phil should return and take up the reins. 'Too many problems' were the words that leapt off the page. Phil frowned. What could possibly be problematic about an estate that now practically ran itself, thanks to the efforts of his older brother, William, who'd worked hard to undo the years of their father's neglect? It was sheer bad luck that William had died unwed, leaving everything to Phil. He sighed to himself. Everything. All the responsibility and the impending threat of a

humdrum life when all he desired – at least for a while – was to serve king and country and enjoy a few adventures before settling down.

Luckily for Phil, Uncle Ralph had offered to step in, enabling Phil to remain in London, ostensibly acting as Richard Lacey's London secretary and man of business. A member of the landed gentry like Phil, Richard had been approached discreetly by Lord Liverpool and had swiftly agreed to assist in the subterfuge. A fellow Cornishman and an ardent patriot, Richard knew the threat posed by Boney was very real, and he never demurred whenever Phil asked for leave to carry out his secret duties. The pair were more like friends, having known each other in their younger days, both of them obsessed with engineering and both keen to ensure that Napoleon never set foot in their country – not unless he was wearing chains. Phil's secret life was never discussed or alluded to.

'If I don't know anything, I can't give any secrets away, accidentally or otherwise,' Richard had told him at the start of their collusion, and so that was how it was.

The door rattled and Phil looked up. 'Enter.'

He wondered what Mrs Dobson wanted now. The door moved on its hinges, and a head appeared round it – a head that most definitely did not belong to his housekeeper.

'Mrs Dobson told me that I'd find you in here.'

Phil leapt to his feet. 'Come in, Miss Hart. I trust you slept well? Have you breakfasted yet?'

Her gaze flickered over the room as she answered in softly modulated tones. 'Thank you, yes, Mr Cullen, to both your questions. I'm afraid I have rather overslept. I'm usually up at first light.' She was seemingly satisfied with the state of his study. Who indeed would not approve of such a well-ordered temple of industry, with its tidy desk with neat piles of papers and shelves of carefully arranged books? A smile lit up her face as she added, 'Mrs Dobson was kind enough to bring me a tray when she woke me.'

Phil's eyes widened momentarily. It wasn't usual for his housekeeper to indulge his friends. It occurred to him that perhaps Mrs Dobson had just been making an exception for the higher sensibilities of such a charming female. Seeing Miss Hart in daylight, he had to admit that she looked very charming, especially when she smiled. Ordering his thoughts to behave, he smiled back at her.

'Come and sit down, Miss Hart.'

He pulled out a chair for her and perched himself on the side of his desk. His gaze took in her dainty, reddened hands as she ran them over her skirts in a futile attempt to smooth the creases. Her dress, though shabby, was clean and well repaired. He noted that her dark chestnut hair, which he recalled as being rather unkempt the previous night, was now tied back in a neat bun. She raised her head, and for the first time he had an excellent view of her face. The pallor of her

cheeks, which he attributed to her confinement by the despicable Mrs Newbody, contrasted with the dark lustre of her hair. Her striking blue eyes peered at him with a peculiar intensity and what he could only describe as a hint of anxiety. It was difficult for him to drag his own gaze away. In short, she was attractive – not a beauty, but definitely not a hardship to gaze upon.

‘I suppose I’d better decide what is to be done with you, Miss Hart.’ He knew he’d said the wrong thing when two spots of colour appeared in her cheeks.

‘I beg your pardon, sir?’ Her eyes flashed as she spoke, and he was taken by surprise at her tone: suppressed anger, if he was not mistaken. Though why should she be angry? He’d rescued her from that awful place, hadn’t he?

‘What is the matter, Miss Hart? I’m merely stating the obvious. I will need to come up with a place of safety for you. You can’t stay here.’ No, she definitely couldn’t stay. His was a bachelor household.

Her blue eyes narrowed. ‘I agree, Mr Cullen. But I will decide—’

He cut her off. He was in charge here. ‘What are you talking about? You’ve told me you don’t have any family. You do not know London. How can you possibly decide for yourself? Leave it to me, why don’t you?’ He disguised his irritation at her impertinence with the smile he’d withheld previously. A smile that usually got him out of tight spots. It didn’t work now. Miss Hart continued to glare at him. If looks could kill, he was sure he’d be lying dead on his Turkey carpet by now.

‘You probably think you know best, Mr Cullen, but really’ – she rolled her eyes – ‘do you expect me to wait mute until you decide where I should be sent to live the rest of my life? Be reasonable, please.’ Her words were coming out through clenched teeth, he could tell. He’d not expected her to argue. Indeed, he’d anticipated only gratitude for his help and thought she’d be ready to accept any suggestion he made.

This was the second character misjudgement he’d made in less than a week, and in his line of work it was something he should excel at. First the lad Jack and now Miss Hart. His jaw tightened. As a gentleman, it was his role to protect any female in his care. Why was she being obstinate when all he wanted to do was ensure her safety? His self-confidence dissolved in a mist of uncertainty. Playing for time, he pushed himself away from the desk and paced to the window, hands clenched by his sides. Gazing at the scene outside, he instinctively knew Miss Hart’s head had turned to follow him. *Damn it!* He could feel her eyes burning into the back of his skull.

He got his irritation under control and turned to face her. Yes, as expected, she had turned in her chair and was looking at him with those penetrating blue eyes. Her legs, he noticed, were outlined under her dress as she’d twisted in her seat – quite shapely legs, in fact. He dragged his eyes away and tried a different tack.

‘What *would* you like to do then, Miss Hart? Have you any ideas?’

The bright blue eyes widened momentarily before turning away. The once-pale

cheeks were now delightfully flushed. ‘Erm... well, I haven’t a firm plan as yet.’ There was a lingering hint of defiance as her gaze returned to his. ‘But I’m sure I will think of something.’

He hid his smirk behind his hand as he pretended to clear his throat. ‘Well, why don’t you go and ponder on it in the drawing room while I carry on with some urgent business? I shouldn’t be above an hour. We can discuss the matter in more detail then. There should be some reading material there to keep you occupied should you get bored after you’ve come up with your plan.’

Miss Hart looked as if she was about to argue, and then her mouth clamped shut. She nodded her head and stood up, giving him a brief flash of her eyes from beneath lowered lashes before she turned to the door.

‘Very well, sir.’

By the slump of her shoulders as she departed the room, he had the satisfaction of knowing that she’d bowed to his superior knowledge of how things should be ordered. His world tilted back onto its axis.



As soon as the door closed behind her, Sophia straightened her back and marched swiftly up the stairs, thoughts whirling in her head. He’d spoken to her as if she were a child. Just because he’d come to her aid last night didn’t give him the right to order her life. She was profoundly grateful for his help. She couldn’t have escaped without his assistance and would not have lasted five minutes on the leads. But now she saw how he wished to take control, and she was not prepared to give him that. She would deal with matters on her own. That was how it had to be from now on. Besides, she was not going back to Mrs Archer. How could she trust the woman who’d put her in Ruth Newbody’s clutches? No, there was only one person she trusted other than herself.

She grimaced. She didn’t want to think badly of Mr Cullen – he’d rescued her, after all. But how typical of a man to believe only he could sort things out. And to make matters worse, last night he’d given her the impression that she would be party to any decisions. That was a disappointment.

He’d looked so handsome as he came from behind his desk to lead her to a seat, with his charming smile and dark eyes that twinkled with good humour – at first. But the minute she’d spoken out, his expression had changed to one of barely concealed irritation. He probably thought she hadn’t seen his condescending smirk when she’d been unable to come up with a quick solution. That was rich! He hadn’t got a plan either, if she guessed right. He hadn’t a clue how to proceed. She had the strong impression his assistance last night had been a sudden chivalrous impulse. One he now seemed to be regretting. Never mind. She would come up with a plan of her own.

She reached her room and slipped inside, turning the key in the lock. Her valise

was still under the bed, and she pulled it out, checking that her money and the box containing the precious souvenir of her parents were both still there. In the hope of eventual escape, Sophia had purloined the odd coin found lying forgotten under the chairs and sofas of the brothel's parlours. It never ceased to amaze her how gentlemen could forget to have a care for their coins – or anything else for that matter – when a willing woman was around.

She'd also deemed it wise to read anything she spotted lying unguarded on Ruth Newbody's desk. It didn't happen often. For some reason, Newbody was cautious – extremely so – but when Sophia had seen something written in what appeared to be French, she'd taken note. She'd had just enough time to put the letter back where she'd found it and return to her dusting before her captor stalked in. Mrs Newbody had given her a curious look when she'd spotted the document on her desk and had hastily locked it away in a drawer, but nothing was said.

Sophia, satisfied that her money was safe, leaned back on her heels and looked around the room. The purse that Mr Cullen had given her lay on the bedside table. If she was careful, she'd be able to buy a second-hand cloak for her journey and pay for the stage fare back to Oxford. She needed to see Hannah and ascertain whether the position as a companion was still free. If it was, she could be on her way, and no-one would be any the wiser. She frowned to herself. If only she'd chosen that post instead of the one Ruth Newbody had dangled in front of her. If only Mrs Archer had spoken up.

Sophia shook her head. There was no point wasting time over things that had gone wrong. She needed to learn from her mistakes and make the right decisions henceforth. That meant trusting no-one and keeping herself to herself. Though she did feel guilty at not giving Mr Cullen and Mrs Dobson her real name. But did it really matter? In a day or two, he'd have forgotten all about her. In fact, to judge by the irritation she'd roused in him, he'd probably be glad to be rid of her. She would leave a note in any case and explain why she was going. That ought to make things good between them. And when she could, she would repay the money she owed him.

Sophia wrote her note, leaving it where it was bound to be discovered. She packed her valise, then unlocked her door and listened. There were no sounds from downstairs. She took a few steps out and leaned over the banister to see if Mr Cullen's study door was closed. From the service rooms, Mrs Dobson's voice wafted up. There seemed to be a delivery to the kitchen.

Now was her chance. Sophia returned to her room where she scooped up the purse and hid it in the pocket under her skirts, picked up the valise, and crept downstairs. Her heart nearly stopped when there was a loud creak. She halted and held her breath, every nerve at breaking point. Mr Cullen did not come charging out of his study demanding to know what she was doing, and Mrs Dobson could

still be heard ordering the scullery maid to place the freshly delivered vegetables on the kitchen table.

Sophia breathed again and got down the last of the stairs. The front door handle turned easily, and before she knew it, she was down the front steps and striding along the road.

Chapter 3

PHIL PACED UP AND down the drawing room. Where had the chit gone? He'd told her to wait for him there, and when he'd bowled in, fully expecting her to be patiently waiting for him, she was nowhere to be seen. He checked his pocket watch. Well, he'd give her another couple of minutes. Perhaps she'd gone to fetch something for Mrs Dobson. He'd heard all the commotion earlier – it had sounded like a delivery of sorts. No wonder he spent so much time at Richard's where peace and quiet was usually guaranteed. How could he concentrate with all that racket going on? Mrs Dobson was a good housekeeper, reliable and discreet, God bless her, but goodness, she didn't know the meaning of tranquillity.

Phil's eyes focussed on the street outside; it was busy with passers-by, tradesmen, and hawkers plying their wares. A young woman with baskets of cherries over her arms was standing on the corner, her mouth opening and closing. In his head, Phil heard the words 'Cherry ripe! Buy my fresh cherries.' He wondered briefly if Mrs Dobson had procured any. He was almost certain he'd heard the front door open and close earlier. Perhaps there would be cherries for his dessert that evening. Miss Hart's face sprang to his mind. Her lips were the colour of cherries... Quite luscious, in fact. He licked his lips. A crash from the kitchen brought him out of his reverie, and he banished all thoughts of cherry-ripe lips. The last thing he needed was another complication in his life. Maintaining his cover as an ordinary man of business was stretching his nerves as it was.

He checked the clock on the mantelpiece. It was well over five minutes now. What was she doing? He pulled the bell for Mrs Dobson. If she was keeping the girl busy, he would not complain. A tap on the door, and Mrs Dobson stepped into the room.

'You rang, sir? Would you like me to bring you some refreshments?'

'Just send Miss Hart in when you've finished with her, will you, Mrs Dobson? Tea would be nice.'

Mrs Dobson's brow creased. 'Finished with her, sir? Is she not with you?'

The nerve in Phil's cheek began to throb. 'No, she is not. Can you go up to her room and send her down, please?'

Mrs Dobson made a noise very like a huff, bobbed a curtsy, and exited the room. Phil rolled his eyes.

Barely five minutes later, the drawing-room door flew open, and a red-faced and out-of-breath Mrs Dobson halted on the threshold, her bosom heaving.

'What is it now, Mrs Dobson?' Phil knew he sounded tetchy, but goodness, his patience was being tried today.

'She's gone, sir. Up and left, she has.'

‘Pardon? Take a seat, Mrs Dobson, and breathe slowly. You’ll do yourself no good racing round making yourself breathless like that.’ Phil guided the gasping housekeeper to a chair, a feeling of disquiet gnawing at his insides. He had a horrible suspicion about what she had just told him. *Not again.* The words reverberated in his head. At last, Mrs Dobson got her breath back and spoke.

‘The young lady... Miss Hart... she’s gone, sir. So’s her bag. She left this, and a half-crown on the nightstand.’ On the flat of her palm was a crumpled note.

Phil took it from her, straightened it out, and began to read the elegant copperplate hand:

Dear Mr Cullen,

Thank you for your assistance last evening. I am very grateful for your kindness towards me in my hour of need. I promise to pay back the money you generously gave me as soon as I am able. In the meantime, I plan on making my own decisions about my future, without the help of any gentleman, be he ever so well meaning. Thank you again, sir, and please convey my thanks and good wishes to Mrs Dobson, for whom I leave a very small token of my gratitude. I should be grateful if you would see that she receives the coin I have left for her on the nightstand. I will pay you back.

Yours in gratitude, Miss S. Hart

Phil screwed the letter up into a ball and flung it across the room. ‘She’s got windmills in her head. I’ve never known such a troublesome wench.’

‘Is everything all right, sir? What does she say?’ Mrs Dobson’s voice quavered.

He pulled himself together. By God, that girl had managed to rouse his temper at least twice in her short stay when he’d only been trying to help. He shouldn’t take it out on his housekeeper.

‘Don’t worry, Mrs Dobson. Miss Hart has decided she does not require my assistance any longer. She sends her thanks to you, and a small vail for your kindness.’

‘Oh, sir! Does she know what she is about? London is a wicked place for someone who does not have their wits about them.’

‘Oh, I think we can say that Miss Hart has her wits. Nevertheless, I will try to discover her whereabouts.’ He paused. ‘Although I may not have a great deal of time to devote to it. She has chosen a most inopportune time to make herself scarce. It is likely that I will be journeying to Cornwall shortly, as urgent business calls me back, but I will do what I can before I depart.’ Mrs Dobson’s face fell. Phil guessed the beguiling Miss Hart had made a conquest of his housekeeper. ‘Don’t fret, Mrs Dobson. If she does return in my absence, make her welcome. I daresay the headstrong young lady will soon realise that she cannot get far without help.’

Mrs Dobson wiped her eyes with the corner of her apron. To Phil’s relief, she

had regained her composure. He never quite knew what to do when a female became emotional.

Left on his own, Phil slumped down in the nearest chair and placed his head in his hands. His problems were multiplying by the minute. Wretched girl! Well, he'd have to make inquiries, check the inns where the stage left for Oxford. At least, that's where Miss Hart had said she was from. Was it the truth and would she return there? He could only hope Mrs Newbody didn't have the same idea. The brothel was another place he'd need to check. It was a good thing he knew a reliable inquiry agent. It wasn't something he could ask Lord Liverpool to arrange. If his real employer discovered he'd become embroiled in helping a female to escape a brothel – and Mrs Newbody's at that – he'd rightly be livid. Agents were not supposed to draw attention to themselves.

Phil rubbed his eyes, stretched, and headed towards his study to check his copy of Paterson's excellent road book. After a brief perusal of the volume, he decided that he'd just have time to send a note to Bates, then he'd go himself to the Belle Sauvage in Ludgate to see if she was trying to get a seat there on the early afternoon Oxford coach. If she wasn't there, it would mean a race round to the Spread Eagle in Gracechurch Street, where a later Oxford stage departed. He decided to send the lad Davy to the Bull and Mouth near Smithfield. It, too, had a late-afternoon coach. He raked a hand through his hair – for all his anger at Miss Hart, deep down, the thought that she might have come to harm made his insides squirm. If it couldn't be confirmed that she'd boarded a stage, he'd have to assume that someone or something had prevented her. The nerve in his cheek twitched.

He was about to ring for Davy when a tap sounded on the door, and Molly entered bearing a note.

'Seth brought this round to the kitchen door, sir. Said he'd been instructed to wait for your reply.'

Phil took the note from her and nodded. 'Get cook to give him a bite to eat while I read it.' She bobbed a curtsy and left. Seth was a regular bearer of messages from the War Office, so Phil knew who'd sent the missive as soon as Molly said his name. He broke the seal and began to read. Five minutes later, flames curled round the document as it lay in the fireplace.

In one respect, his instructions from the War Office were welcome; in another, they were the worst he could possibly hope for. He was being ordered to hasten to Falmouth, which meant he could no longer put off his visit to his estate. It also meant he'd only have until dawn on the morrow to discover Miss Hart's whereabouts. Swearing under his breath, Phil took the stairs two at a time and yelled for Davy to attend him. He was seething at the trouble Miss Hart was causing by her precipitate action. If he did get his hands on her, he would very likely wring her pretty little neck.



Sophia was relieved at how easy it was to get to the inn she needed for her journey home. She'd hailed a hackney as soon as she'd rounded the corner from Mr Cullen's house, judging that it would be safer than walking the streets. In spite of her maid's dress, she couldn't overcome her sense of vulnerability at being unescorted. The jarvey was very helpful, advising her that she needed to be at the Bolt in Tun on Fleet Street.

'Shouldn't take more 'n twenty minutes, missus.'

She directed him to stop on the way so that she could purchase a cloak. The one she decided on was worn but serviceable. It had once been a rich shade of blue but now was a faded greyish hue. Sophia didn't mind. It would keep her warm on her journey during the cooler hours of darkness. Besides, she didn't need finery now, she told herself – she had to be practical. More importantly, she needed to blend in. She shivered at the thought of falling into Mrs Newbody's clutches again. And Mr Cullen? She consoled herself with the thought that he was probably pleased to wash his hands of her. She'd had the distinct impression that he wasn't accustomed to a female questioning his authority.

She'd made a promise to herself when trapped at the brothel. If ever she managed to escape, she would not permit anyone to rule her life so comprehensively again. Much as she was grateful for Mr Cullen's intervention, she didn't want to put herself in his power. She'd barely any experience with men, and those she'd seen and heard at the brothel hadn't quelled her fears. Although she was almost certain that he was not like them, it was a risk she was unwilling to take.

After purchasing her ticket, inwardly thanking providence that an inside seat was available, she was directed by the clerk to wait in the parlour of the adjacent Bolt in Tun tavern hotel. He'd advised her that it was a slightly more salubrious location for a respectable young lady like her than the rowdy inn that doubled as a ticket office. As she had an hour or so until her coach's departure at four of the clock, she deemed it wise to follow his advice. On the way, the tantalising smell of roasting apples lured her to the corner where an old lady was selling her wares. Sophia purchased one, its heat warming her hands and reminding her of happier times spent with Hannah and her family in the vicarage kitchen.

Apple consumed, Sophia made her way to the tavern. Clutching the ticket in her hand, she peered nervously into the large parlour. It was a relief to find that most of the people there did indeed look quite respectable. In one corner, a doting mother was issuing hissed instructions to a young chap of about fourteen years, who couldn't have looked more bored if he'd tried. A neat parcel of books tied up with string rested on the table beside him. Sophia suppressed a smile. A party of four middle-aged chaps were deep in conversation. Sophia heard the words 'waste of money', 'so many still dying', and 'it's a disgrace' and guessed they were

discussing something pertaining to the ongoing war with the French.

Sophia's eyes continued to scan the room until she became aware that she herself was under scrutiny. A large, formidable-looking matron was eying her with suspicion from her seat near the window. Biting her lip, Sophia continued to hesitate in the doorway, wondering if she should take a seat as far as possible from everyone else. The matron must have decided that Sophia was not a threat, for she raised her hand to gain Sophia's attention, then patted the space on the bench beside her ample frame.

'Why don't you come and sit next to me, miss? I'm not sure this is quite the place for respectable females like ourselves to be on our own. Never mind, we must put up with these trials and tribulations.' The woman pursed her lips and shook her head as Sophia, deciding that there was safety in numbers, sat down beside her. 'I told Mr Grover I would be home by this evening, and I do not like to disappoint him. He will not manage on his own.' At Sophia's questioning smile, the woman continued. Indeed, Sophia formed the distinct impression that the lady would have continued talking even if she hadn't shown an interest. 'Dear Mr Grover and I run the Mitre inn in Oxford. You might have heard of it?' Before Sophia could answer, the woman sniffed. 'It's a much finer establishment than this, I have to say.' Mrs Grover ran a gloved finger along the windowsill and frowned at the resultant specks of dirt. 'I'm only here because my sister was helping her youngest daughter and was delayed. The midwife said the little 'un would be here six days since. But no. The little mite only made his appearance yesterday.' Mrs Grover nudged Sophia in the ribs. 'Babies take their own time, don't they?'

Sophia coughed. She knew nothing about babies. Fortunately, Mrs Grover did not appear to expect a reply. 'Anyway, I missed the stage yesterday and now I'm here.' She leaned over to whisper loudly in Sophia's ear. 'Look at the state of that tapman's apron. He'd be out on his ear if he worked for me.'

The man, who'd entered the room bearing a tray full of refreshments for the party of gentlemen, glared. Sophia blushed, while her companion appeared unaffected by the dirty looks coming her way.

Thirty minutes and a bowl of hot soup later, Sophia had gleaned that Mrs Grover was the sun in her own universe around whom her satellites, consisting of her husband and staff, revolved. She'd been to London to look after her sister's business, a stationer's shop in St Paul's, that 'could be better run with a bit of discipline', while said sister attended her daughter at the birth of her first grandchild. Despite her domineering ways, it seemed to Sophia that Mrs Grover was a kindly lady at heart. She ensured that they were unmolested by scowling at any unfortunate male who attempted to seat himself nearby and loudly berating the landlord for allowing persons she considered to be riff-raff to enter the dining room. Sophia heard the man heave a great sigh when the imminent departure of

the Hereford stage was announced.

‘This is ours, my dear,’ said Mrs Grover, digging Sophia in the ribs. ‘You said you were for Witney; that’s a couple of stops after Oxford. You won’t get there until the early hours.’ She gave Sophia a penetrating look. ‘Have you got someone to meet you there?’

‘Erm... yes. Yes. My friend is expecting me.’ Sophia didn’t like to lie, but she didn’t want to admit to Mrs Grover that her arrival in Witney would come as a complete surprise to her friend Hannah Simpson, the vicar’s wife.

‘Well, if we are delayed at all, I’d be glad to offer you a bed at the Mitre. We charge reasonable rates, and I guarantee that you will not be pestered. I run a very strict house when it comes to lady customers.’

‘Y-you’re very kind, Mrs Grover, but I’m sure there will be no need.’ Sophia had no intention of delaying her journey by stopping in Oxford or of spending more money than necessary. It was bad enough that she was returning as it was. She only hoped that her visit would be brief... and therefore unnoticed by her erstwhile guardian.



The morning air was fresh and full of the promise of a warm day as the coach pulled into Witney. Sophia wrapped her cloak around her and stepped out into the bustling yard of the Staple Hall inn. Hoping no-one would recognise her – only a faint possibility, she knew, dressed as she was and at that time of day – she slipped out onto the high street and started to walk towards Crawley.

Her journey so far had gone smoothly. There had been no sign of Mrs Newbody or her accomplices. The same was true of Mr Cullen. It was as she’d thought – he was glad to be rid of her. Nevertheless, she felt a pang of regret at knowing she would not see him again. For all his high-handedness, he had helped her in her hour of need, and he hadn’t taken advantage of the situation. A true gentleman, in fact. If only there were more like him about. She frowned to herself. It wasn’t likely that she would now meet such gentlemen. Her reputation was well and truly ruined by her stay in the brothel, and honour would force her to declare her past should she be lucky enough to catch a gentleman’s regard. Who would want her after that?

Besides, she was planning on becoming an elderly lady’s companion. A future of solitude and boredom was to be hers. Sophia blinked a tear from her eye and told herself not to be maudlin. She’d had a narrow escape, and things could surely have been much worse. She straightened her back, lengthened her stride, and headed off across the fields to Crawley, whose rooftops could be seen in the distance.

Soon she was passing the mill and the serried racks of drying frames in the nearby meadows, which were filled with a mix of unbleached and plain-dyed

blankets. The sharp, familiar aroma of damp wool, mingled with the scent of mown grass, made her nose wrinkle. The war against Napoleon had brought some benefits to the area, not least the increased demand for blankets for the army.

Crossing the stone bridge across the River Windrush, Sophia hurried up the lane leading to the vicarage. It was still quite early with not too many people about. She prayed that no-one would take notice of a seemingly lowly servant girl visiting the vicar's wife. A not unusual occurrence as Hannah was renowned for her good works for the poor of the parish. Pulling her hood low over her face, Sophia knocked on the door. It was opened by Mrs Meg, the housekeeper, who barely gave her a glance. The cloak was doing a good job of disguising her identity.

'If you're looking for a handout, go round to the back door, miss. Cook will give you some bread.' Mrs Meg made to close the door, but in desperation Sophia put her foot out.

'No, no. Thank you all the same. I'm here to see Mrs Simpson.'

Mrs Meg's tone became sharp. 'And who should I say is calling? She don't see everybody who turns up on her doorstep, you know.'

Sophia racked her brains. What could she say that would persuade her friend Hannah to admit her, something that wouldn't give her identity away to the housekeeper?

After a few uncomfortable seconds, during which the housekeeper drummed her fingers on the door jamb, Sophia at last said, 'Please tell her I've come about the position of a companion to her friend.' Sophia crossed her fingers and hoped that would do the trick. As far as she knew, Hannah hadn't mentioned her friend's need for a companion to anyone else.

The housekeeper sniffed. 'Very well. Wait there.' The door closed with a click.

It seemed like an age until the door opened again. The housekeeper, who looked unsure about admitting this forward stranger, gestured Sophia inside. 'Mistress will see you in the front parlour. Follow me.'

With difficulty, Sophia restrained herself from barging ahead. It wouldn't do to reveal she knew the house well. Curbing her impatience, she waited as Mrs Meg opened the door to the parlour, revealing Hannah, engrossed at her desk under the window. Sophia smiled at the sight. How like Hannah to be up early at her self-imposed task of writing to all and sundry in the hope of bringing attention to the wretched conditions of the poor. Hannah looked up as Sophia entered, a friendly but wary expression on her face.

'You may leave us, Mrs Meg. I will ring for you shortly.' Her gaze turned back to Sophia. 'Now, what can I do for you, my dear?'

Sophia waited until the door closed behind her, then flung off her hood.

Her friend's mouth dropped open. 'Sophia! What are you doing here?' Dropping her pen on the desk, Hannah stood up to greet her friend with a warm embrace.

Suddenly, the enormity of Sophia's predicament overwhelmed her. The hold over her composure, which she'd maintained for so long, failed at last.

'Oh, Hannah. Everything has gone wrong. Such terrible things have happened, and I don't know what to do.'

Some thirty minutes later, a still red-eyed but calmer Sophia was sipping tea from a delicate china cup while the vicar's wife looked on, shaking her head.

'This sort of thing cannot be allowed to continue. I really ought to notify the archbishop of Canterbury.' Hannah was adamant in her condemnation. 'I've been campaigning for so long against these temples of iniquity. I cannot believe the woman had the gall to come to a village such as this to recruit more victims for her vile establishment.'

'I agree. But, Hannah, if you notify the archbishop, Mrs Newbody will be bound to discover my whereabouts. She will know I've returned to Crawley. Please do not, for my sake, or wait at least until I am safely established elsewhere.' Sophia's pleas succeeded. Hannah nodded at last. But by the gleam in her eye, Sophia could tell that her alarmingly efficient friend was already formulating another plan.

'Well, my dear. I think you are correct. We must keep your presence here a secret.' She sent Sophia a rueful smile. 'I understand your reluctance to let your patroness, Mrs Archer, know what has happened. Such a respectable lady – the shock would surely kill her.'

Sophia curled her lip and remained silent. Mrs Archer had brought her up since she was a babe – Sophia had no knowledge of her real parents – but Mrs Archer's care had been the mean-spirited sort. She'd never shown any affection for her charge and had never revealed to Sophia the details of her background. Money from a secret benefactor was sent for her upkeep and grudgingly spent by Mrs Archer on adequate clothes and an education quite advanced for a mere female. Sophia had deduced that whoever was funding her upkeep wanted her to be well read and competent with numbers, as well as learning the usual female accomplishments. That was how Sophia had made the acquaintance of Hannah Simpson. The vicar's young wife had taken the girl under her wing, teaching her music and drawing, and once Sophia's real intelligence had been recognised, they had become firm friends.

Hannah leaned over and squeezed Sophia's arm. 'Don't worry, my dear. We will sort something out. Now, why don't you go and lie down for an hour or two? You look quite fatigued.' At Sophia's shake of her head, Hannah insisted. 'Don't be silly, Sophia. Sleep will put things into perspective. Mrs Meg is the soul of discretion, and if I warn her that she must not talk of your presence, she will comply.'

'But what if someone comes looking for me?' Sophia shivered at the thought of Mrs Newbody discovering her whereabouts.

Hannah put a finger against her lips. ‘Shh, don’t argue. I’ll ask young Jem to keep an eye out for strangers in the village. I’ll tell him the Reverend is concerned about reports of burglaries in the district.’

Sophia stifled a yawn. The journey in the coach had not been a comfortable one, making sleep impossible. Her friend was talking sense, and now she’d confided all her troubles, there was nothing more to be done at present. Allowing herself to be led upstairs to a charming little bedroom under the eaves, it wasn’t long before she fell fast asleep.



By evening, matters had been settled. It was agreed that Hannah would write to Emmaline, her elderly friend, to inquire if she still needed a companion. Emmaline had only written the previous week to say her husband was concerned for her health and that they were planning on visiting Bath to allow her to recuperate. In the letter, there was no mention of whether a suitable companion had already been found.

Hannah was confident that Sophia’s presence in the vicarage could be kept a secret for several days until a reply from Emmaline was received. In the event that her friend did not require Sophia, Hannah had someone else in mind who might be glad of a companion.

‘So you see, Sophia, I will sort something out for you. Never fear,’ Hannah said confidently as the two of them sat in the parlour after dinner.

It wasn’t long before the Reverend Simpson joined them. He’d returned that afternoon from a parochial meeting in Witney and had been swiftly apprised of Sophia’s predicament. To Sophia’s relief, he was fully in support of his wife’s plan and assured Sophia that Hannah would sort something out for her. Faced with his adamant confidence in his wife’s abilities, Sophia gradually began to relax. Perhaps things would work out after all – with such good friends, how could they not?

Reverend Simpson poured himself a glass of port while Hannah and Sophia sipped at their tea. He settled down on the sofa next to his wife.

‘Just had that lad Jem telling me that Mrs Archer had a visitor. A burly chap who looked as if he’d spent the day travelling. Didn’t like the sound of him from Jem’s description, sounded more like a prize-fighter. Wonder what he wants with the likes of Mrs Archer.’

Sophia nearly dropped her cup. ‘Oh dear. It must be one of Mrs Newbody’s men.’

Hannah put her own cup down and turned to her husband. ‘It sounds as if that woman from London is indeed trying to find out where Sophia has run to. My dear, you must go and discover what he wanted from Mrs Archer.’

Reverend Simpson immediately set his glass down. ‘Of course, of course. Why

did I not think? It's rather late, but I can say that I received a report of a disreputable stranger loitering in the village. Mrs Archer cannot object to my checking on her safety.' He patted his wife's hand. 'Don't worry. I won't mention Sophia's name at all.'

Hannah sent her husband a worshipful smile. Sophia observed this intimacy with a pang of envy. How she would love to have someone to love like that, but any chance of that sort of happiness for her was lost forever.

Some twenty minutes later, the vicar returned bearing the news that Sophia's suspicions seemed to be correct. Mrs Archer had been evasive about the identity of her visitor, confirming only that the stranger had indeed called at her house with a message from her sister.

Sophia frowned. 'That's strange. I didn't know she had a sister.'

'What? All those years living together and she never disclosed any facts about her family?' Hannah didn't hide her surprise. 'I know she was unwilling to share details of your parentage, Sophia, but I hadn't realised she never spoke of her own folk. Did she never mention Mr Archer?'

'Only that he had been a respectable gentleman who had made money on the Exchange, leaving her a comfortable allowance to live on.' Sophia shrugged. 'She never mentioned anyone else, least of all who it was who funded my keep. I stopped asking questions eventually because it seemed to upset her so.'

Upset was a mild word to describe the towering rage that would grip Mrs Archer whenever Sophia dared to raise the subject of her benefactor's identity. 'But the strange thing is' – Sophia paused, trying to remember – 'when she announced that Mrs Newbody was offering me a position as a companion, she described her as an old acquaintance. Though I have to say, it seemed odd that she'd never mentioned her before. And when Mrs Newbody herself came to collect me, relations between them appeared quite strained. At one point I heard what I can only describe as an argument between them.'

'Mmm... it does sound rather odd,' agreed Hannah. 'Never mind. The chap is gone. In a few days, with luck, you will be joining Emmaline and starting your new life.' Sophia mustn't have sufficiently disguised her lack of enthusiasm for this prospect, for her friend added, 'I promise you will like Emmaline. She's a lively lady, isn't she, Reverend? She and her husband travelled the world in their younger days and have such tales to tell. I can't believe she will have changed so much since I last saw her some three years ago.'

The vicar nodded in agreement and gave Sophia a reassuring smile. 'Don't fret, Sophia. I'm sure things will work out. And if they don't, you're always welcome to return here, and we will think of something else, won't we, Hannah?'

Sophia smiled at the couple who were so willing to help her sort her life out. She really was blessed in her friends.



A week had passed since Sophia's arrival in Crawley, and trying to remain hidden in the vicarage was beginning to shred her nerves. At least in the evenings Hannah had deemed it safe enough for her to venture into the secluded garden for some fresh air, but during the day she was confined to the house. Even worse, when there were visitors – and there frequently were – she was forced to flee to the room under the eaves. It was just as well. The vicar received reports of another stranger asking questions in the village, this time a more respectable-looking gent who'd admitted that he was seeking information on behalf of a client about a missing young woman. After a day's fruitless search, he too departed.

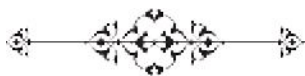
At last, the news came that she'd been hoping for. Hannah's friend did indeed still require a companion and would be delighted to take on the young lady recommended by her friend for a trial period. They were to meet up in Bath, where she and her husband had taken a house near Sydney Gardens, and she had obligingly sent the fare for Sophia to travel there by mail.

Hannah was very excited. 'Well this is even better than we expected, isn't it, Sophia? Travelling by mail, you'll be there in no time. Her husband must have done very well with prize money, although I think Emmaline herself had a significant portion left to her on her father's death. You will be moving in elevated circles. Even though you will only be a companion, my dear, I know you will shine.'

Sophia smiled at her friend's enthusiasm. If only she could share the same sense of optimism.

Two days later, at daybreak, Reverend Simpson departed in his gig to visit a relative in Oxford. Or, at least, that was the story told to explain his very early start and absence from parish duties for a day and a half. In reality, with the help of his wife, Sophia was secreted under a blanket in the back of the gig, only emerging when they were past the Eynsham toll bridge. Eventually, Sophia was safely placed on the Worcester mail coach to Maidenhead, where she then took the mail to Bath... and her new life.

Chapter 4



Three months later

PHIL SAUNTERED DOWN THE crowded Falmouth high street. Despite his initial misgivings about returning, he was quite enjoying life down on the coast. It wasn't as boring as he remembered it – or was it because he was getting older? Now thirty-four, he considered himself old. Was he really hankering for a settled way of life? Surely not. His parents' example would be enough to put anyone off married domesticity. With an arranged marriage that suited both families but not the actual participants, the relationship between his parents had been sterile and cold, and both he and his brother had been left to the mercy of the servants. The only warmth they'd enjoyed came from their uncle and his wife, his uncle's home a refuge from the chilly atmosphere and frigid silences that were the norm at their own home.

Phil smiled and tipped his beaver hat to a strolling couple who waved to him from across the road. Yes, what with all the naval officers and their wives stationed there, and the comings and goings of the packets to Lisbon and elsewhere, there was always something to talk about or someone to talk to. Passengers for the packets brought news from London and other places around the country, while those returning to home shores were always sources of information for goings-on abroad. All that, and the extra excitement of keeping an ear to the ground for any suggestion of espionage. This was not domesticity.

He'd delayed his departure from London for as long as he dared. Although he'd been ordered to make all haste to Falmouth, he'd known the War Office wasn't expecting him to emulate Lieutenant Lapenotiere's journey in reverse – two hundred and seventy-one miles in under thirty-eight hours; that would be too much! His task was nowhere near as important as those Trafalgar dispatches.

He frowned as he recalled his race round the city before he departed, trying to discover Miss Hart's whereabouts. What a trial she had been. There had been no sign of her at any of the staging inns he'd made inquiries at, although Bates, his agent, had discovered that a young woman answering her description had purchased a ticket for Witney at the Bolt in Tun tavern. Bates, a sharp-witted chap, had pointed out that Witney wasn't far from Oxford, only fourteen miles or so. Acting on a hunch, Phil instructed the agent to follow this up.

The report he got back told him that the landlady of the Mitre in Oxford – a formidable lady by all accounts – had disclosed that she remembered a very

pleasant, respectable young lady who'd joined her on the journey to Oxford. The young lady had travelled on to Witney, saying she had a friend there with whom she was going to stay. No, she hadn't given her name as Hart. As far as she recalled, she hadn't given a name at all. Though, she'd mentioned she'd been working as a companion, but unfortunately her employer had died, and she'd been turned off. Such a nicely mannered young lady was sure to find a suitable position soon, Mrs Grover had no doubt. She would have offered her a place in her establishment, but she could see that working at an inn – be it ever so respectable as the Mitre indeed was – would not be suitable for someone so refined.

Bates had then proceeded to Witney where, by cultivating acquaintances in the town, he established that a young woman had been seen heading out Crawley way a few days previously. Following that up, he'd tried the local tavern in Crawley, the Lamb. Again, he drew a blank. The only young woman who fitted the vague description given by Mrs Grover was a certain Miss Turner who'd resided in Crawley with the widowed Mrs Archer for many years. But she couldn't possibly be the female that Phil was seeking, for that young lady had departed some weeks ago in an elegant carriage and hadn't been seen since.

A visit to Mrs Archer elicited a complete denial that her young lady had returned. She was now said to be living with relatives up in Manchester. A call at the vicarage to follow up the sighting of a poverty-stricken female who'd been seen heading that way in the early hours – Phil's agent was nothing if not thorough – also drew a blank.

Phil continued up the high street, furrows now creasing his brow. Why was it he couldn't get Sophia Hart out of his head? He couldn't explain it, but from the moment he'd set eyes on her terrified face, a spark within him had grown into a flame. He had to know she was safe. She'd haunted his dreams nearly every night, and even walking down the street in daylight hours, he would think he'd glimpsed her passing by, only to be disappointed when he doubled back to check – giving one or two ladies quite a start for his impertinence, it had to be said.

He'd instructed an informant to sound out Mrs Newbody's establishment, and the word there was that the lady had been furious at her loss. She, too, had sent out to search for the girl, but as far as he could tell, she'd also failed to find her quarry. What had been Ruth Newbody's interest in the girl anyway? he asked himself. Surely there were females aplenty willing to join her establishment. What was special about Sophia Hart? Certainly, she was attractive, with an engaging smile and startlingly blue eyes. Her voice did not grate on the ear as some female voices did. She had spirit. She was the first female who'd dared to defy him, and he'd begun to suspect that behind her unassuming outward appearance, something else entirely lurked. Why, when he went to find her in the brothel's attics, she hadn't been cowering, as he'd expected, but planning her own escape.

And she'd been intelligent and quick-witted enough to have evaded both Mrs Newbody and himself.

Oblivious to the effect of his frustrated scowl on passers-by, who were all giving him a wide berth, he strode on towards the quayside, telling himself that he really ought to forget about the mysterious Miss Hart.

'Ahoy there, Mr Cullen!' a voice boomed from behind, jerking him out of his thoughts. He turned to see Admiral Pridham, newly returned from a recent sojourn in Bath. The admiral, a jovial, down-to-earth fellow, had been introduced to Phil on his first entrée to Falmouth life, his name mentioned in the orders he'd received from the War Office as a reliable contact. Phil was well aware of the shrewd and intelligent mind lurking beneath the admiral's façade of pleasing bonhomie. He'd been impressed with the man's sharp observations of their mutual acquaintances in the several covert meetings they'd held to discuss the ongoing investigation.

Phil, his scowl now replaced with a broad smile, greeted his friend.

'You're returned to us, sir. How is your lady wife? Did her recuperative trip to Bath do the trick?'

'All hale and hearty now, I thank you, Mr Cullen. All hale and hearty.'

They fell into step and continued up the street. In tones lower than usual, the admiral added with a sigh, 'It's taken a weight off my mind, my boy, I can tell you. What with all this havey-cavey business, Mrs Pridham's health has been a sore added worry. But yes, she is fully restored to good health. In fact, she will be joining me here shortly. I've left her in Bath to enjoy a few days' shopping with a young friend.' There was a deep rumble, the admiral's version of a chuckle. 'I should've realised that what was required was some female company to cheer her up. I'm afraid I have been so taken up with this business I've quite neglected her.'

'Well, I'm pleased to hear she is well, sir.' Phil pointed with his cane to the Ship and Anchor, a popular tavern with several parlours, ideal for a private conversation. 'Now, would you care to join me in yon tavern for a glass or two, and I can let you know what has occurred in your absence?'

'Splendid, my boy. Lead the way.'

'The Preventive Water Guard have reported a lot of activity recently,' Phil said as soon as the tapster had quit the room, leaving the two gentlemen to their bottle of port. The admiral's eyebrows rose. 'They haven't actually caught anyone, but the word is, something big is about to take place.' Phil paused to take a sip from his glass and let his words sink in. 'Our friends think there is a shipment of gold hidden somewhere about, ready to be sent over the water.'

The admiral scratched his chin and nodded.

'Hmm, very interesting indeed. I have news too... good news in some ways. I've had word from friends in the Admiralty. Lots of rumours doing the rounds in Whitehall about a spy ring being uncovered... by the Duke of Wheatley of all

people.’ The admiral’s hand hovered over his mouth as he continued. ‘Never heard much good about the chap, into lots of havey-cavey business by all accounts, but it seems he’s not what I thought. Between you and me’ – his eyes darted left and right – ‘he holds a senior post in the War Office, and it was his agents that uncovered the spy ring, based in a brothel of all places. Some pretty important people exposed to blackmail, so it was not the usual sort of establishment.’ Lips curled in disgust, he shook his head. ‘Lord knows what they were up to, to get themselves implicated in something like that.’ There was another pause as he inhaled from his pipe. ‘Anyway, as I was saying, whoever was doing the blackmailing died while attempting to escape – a woman, would you believe? Couldn’t get any names... everyone’s being a bit tight-lipped.’

Phil leaned back in his seat. So the news he’d heard in confidence was now common knowledge... or at least some of it. It was a relief that Mrs Newbody’s name had not come out. That would help Miss Hart, wherever she was. It would be bad enough to be linked to a brothel owner – but a traitor as well? Miss Hart’s reputation would be most unlikely to recover. Phil also knew that it had been the Duke of Wheatley and his operatives who had managed to put a stop to Ruth Newbody’s nefarious activities. For all the brooding aristocrat’s dubious reputation – and Phil had been privy to some of the accusations – there was no doubting his loyalty to king and country. Newbody’s body had been recovered from the Thames, according to his sources, her features unrecognisable but identifiable by her clothes. He decided to keep all this information to himself. Instead, he set his glass down and said, ‘That’s all very well. It’s good that the French operation in London has been closed down, but our problems here are more pressing. How do we go about finding this gold shipment? None of my own informants can discover anything more solid than rumour, and to ask too many questions would jeopardise our entire network.’

Admiral Pridham, who’d been inspecting the contents of his glass against the light from the window, patted Phil’s arm. ‘They’ve done well to learn as much as that, lad. Don’t worry. I think it’s a watch-and-wait game. All my years at sea have taught me to keep my eyes and ears open. It’s astonishing what can be learned by close observation of the enemy. We’ll get ’em, lad.’

Phil shrugged. He wished he could share his friend’s optimism. He had several government informers reporting back to him, local people working in the town’s taverns and coffee houses who listened out for any suspicious talk. A clerk in a shipping office kept a note of any transactions he thought Phil should know about, and of course the local post office, where all mail was processed before being sent on to London, had its own operatives. So far, they had come up with nothing to indicate who was involved with the Falmouth spy ring and nothing about the whereabouts of any gold.

Admiral Pridham drained his glass and licked his lips. ‘This reminds me – you

must come and join us for dinner next week. I've got a rather nice Portuguese wine. Came over with the last packet.' Although ostensibly retired, the admiral had many friends who were still in service and who regularly supplied him with decent bottles. 'I don't want to drink it on my own,' he continued with a grin. 'I'll get Mrs Pridham to organise something. She enjoys having company. She should be back by the week's end... or sooner if she's spent up.' Another chuckle rumbled in the admiral's chest. 'You wouldn't think there'd be so many shops in a smallish place like Bath, would you? But I wager she has found every one!'

Phil grinned. Having met Mrs Pridham once or twice, he knew she was a sensible lady, not given to fripperies, and adored by her husband – a feeling that was evidently mutual. Such a contrast to the relationship enjoyed by his own parents. But he knew Mrs Pridham was surely an exception.

'I would very much enjoy joining you and Mrs Pridham one evening, Admiral. I shall look forward to it. Now, will you be attending the assembly this coming Saturday? I thought it might be a good occasion to pick up on the local *on dits*. I hear one of the larger houses in town has been recently let, and I wondered if the new tenant might show their face.'

Yes, the talk Phil had heard from one of his informants was of the arrival of a party said to be from the Midlands. A couple of servants, big brawny chaps, had been drinking in one of the waterside taverns, but despite being plied with a free drink or two, they had remained curiously tight-lipped about their employer.

'Splendid idea. We need to make sure we are aware of any new additions to Falmouth society. Though it might be too much for Mrs Pridham, if she is still tired from her journey back. Nevertheless, I shall be there.' Admiral Pridham's eyes softened. 'Mrs Pridham will forgive my absence from home. She understands that in these uncertain times I have a duty to perform, even though I am retired from active service.' Almost to himself, he added, 'She's a very fine woman. Never flinched in a storm. Yes, indeed, I'm a lucky man.' He turned to Phil, an unsettling gleam in his eye. 'You're still unmarried, are you not?'

Phil nodded, a knot forming in his stomach. He guessed what was coming.

'Well we must remedy that, my boy. I'll find you someone just like my Emmy. That's what you need.' With a final rumble, the admiral clapped Phil on the back and departed before Phil could think of a suitable reply.

Left on his own, Phil rolled his eyes. Well, he might indeed have to marry at some point, but for now he was enjoying his bachelor lifestyle. No-one to worry about. And he did not want to make the same mistake his parents had. They'd ended up trapped and unhappy, inflicting their unhappiness on him and his brother and ensuring both boys were wary of marriage. He raised his glass and drained the contents. If he ever decided it was time to marry, he needed to find the right sort of female. And he wasn't going to find her in Falmouth, of that he was certain.



Sophia leaned back on her heels and sighed. How she'd managed to get all her new clothes in the trunk had been a miracle. She'd never had so many garments in her life. Hannah had been correct about her friend. Emmaline Pridham was an absolute darling. She and Sophia had liked each other on sight, Sophia finding the sensible and caring woman very much like her friend Hannah, but with an added sense of adventure. The stories Emmaline had told of being at sea with her husband had fascinated and enthralled Sophia. She suspected that Emmaline had taken to her because she reminded Emmaline of her own daughter, now married to a naval captain with children of her own and living in Deptford near the dockyard.

On her arrival in Bath, Sophia hadn't known what to expect. She'd been informed at her first interview with Admiral Pridham that his wife was quite indisposed – low in spirits and uninterested in her surroundings. The admiral had gone on to confide that he was quite at his wits' end. He'd taken his dear wife to the Pump Room several times to partake of the waters, but much good it had done her. He told Sophia that he was relying on her to try and bring his wife out of herself, as he really didn't know how he could manage without his darling Emmy by his side.

Feeling daunted, Sophia hoped she was up to the task. How could she succeed when the famous waters of Bath had failed? She need not have feared. Mrs Pridham's eyes had sparked with interest as soon as the admiral had brought Sophia into the drawing room.

'Why, my dear, you are the image of our Kitty. Do you not think so, Admiral?'

The admiral blinked. 'Err, yes, my love. Indeed.'

Mrs Pridham shifted to one side of the sofa.

'Come, Miss Turner, tell me all about yourself. Hannah did not say that you were such a pretty girl. I shall have to make sure you do not run off with the first handsome chap who comes along.' Sophia's shock must have shown on her face, for Mrs Pridham laughed. 'Do not look so alarmed, Miss Turner. I am only teasing. Hannah did tell me what a sensible young lady you are.'

From that afternoon, Sophia knew her luck had turned. Mrs Pridham, or Emmaline as Sophia had been instructed to call her, recovered her health and was keen to get out and about. For someone like Sophia, who had been brought up in a small village, this was excitement indeed. She enjoyed accompanying her employer to the Pump Room – not to take the waters, but to mingle and gossip. Both ladies discovered their shared love of books, and so subscriptions were taken out at two of Milsom Street's lending libraries. What a pleasure it was to read the latest novels without waiting months until Mrs Archer deemed they were suitable material for her eyes.

After she had been with Mrs Pridham for a couple of weeks, Sophia was invited to her employer's bedchamber one morning to share a pot of chocolate. Filled with apprehension that the secret of her brothel stay had been discovered, she made her way to Emmaline's room. Her hand shook as she poured the chocolate and handed it to Emmaline, who was still in bed.

'Now, my dear. I hope you don't mind my saying...'

Sophia put her own cup down on the bedside table. Her hand was trembling, and she was sure the chocolate would spill on the beautiful carpet.

'Don't be nervous, my dear. I was just going to ask about your clothes.' Shrewd eyes assessed her.

'P-pardon?' It was all Sophia could say.

'Your clothes, dear. You do not have many, and those you do have seem rather plain. I do hate to see a pretty girl like yourself in such drab clothes, and as my companion who accompanies me nearly everywhere, I think you ought to be supplied with suitable dresses.' Emmaline cocked her head to one side, her eyes twinkling with amusement. 'What do you say?'

Sophia started to breathe again.

'I'm afraid the lady who had care of me considered that I should dress soberly, as suited my station,' Sophia replied truthfully. The dresses that she'd taken with her from Mrs Archer's were no better than the ones Hannah had kindly given her, and of course they had been left in London. 'When I receive my first wages, I intend to buy myself something a little more fitting for the circles in which you are kind enough to take me.'

Emmaline chuckled as she grasped Sophia's hand, a warm smile on her face.

'Oh, my dear! I did not mean for you to purchase them. It would be my pleasure to fund you some dresses. I used to so enjoy going with Kitty to the warehouses and choosing all the pretty fabrics and furbelows. We must go today and find something nice for you. I've also been given the name of a dressmaker who is just starting out. She is keen to make a good impression and will be sure to complete any work sent her way fairly quickly.'

Almost lost for words, Sophia stuttered, 'I... I don't know what to say, Emmaline. You are too, too kind.' There was a lump in her throat, and her eyes were threatening to water.

'Now, now, girl. Don't go all missish on me. I'm merely ensuring you are dressed suitably. I have discussed it with Admiral Pridham, and he fully approves.' Emmaline dabbed at her own eyes before waving Sophia away. 'Now run along and send Anna to me with some hot water. We will depart for the shops as soon as we have breakfasted.'

Only one other person had ever been this kind to Sophia, and it hadn't been her guardian Mrs Archer, whose emotional coldness had instilled only resilience in her ward and killed any expectation of affection. It had been Hannah Simpson.

Newly arrived in the village, Hannah had soon taken the unloved little girl under her wing. It had been with shock and some envy that Sophia had observed how loving Hannah was to her own two sons, and she had often wondered if it was perhaps because she was a female that she elicited no similar affection from Mrs Archer.

But now Mrs Pridham, and her husband too, were being so kind to her, almost as if she were a daughter of the house rather than an employee. Back in her room and brimming with happiness, Sophia took a moment to send up a silent prayer of thanks for the friendships she'd been blessed with. If only this wonderful situation could continue, her past life and the taint of Mrs Newbody expunged forever.

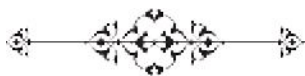
And now Sophia had a trunk full of fine clothes. Emmaline had not stopped at one or two dresses. She'd also insisted on some spencers, several pairs of shoes, a pair of boots, and some hats, 'for one cannot have a pretty outfit without a suitable hat to set it off, can one, Sophia?' Sophia had insisted on purchasing gloves and a reticule with her own money, feeling a little guilty at what she considered ill-gotten gains. She really must repay Mr Cullen. He had been a true gentleman in rescuing her and deserved better than the terse note she had left. She hoped he'd understood that her desperate action had been the result of weeks of anxiety and not malice or ingratitude on her part.

Sophia's eyes alighted on the final item to be packed. It was the tiny box containing the only tangible link to her parents. Mrs Archer had revealed its existence on Sophia's eighteenth birthday when she'd shoved it across the breakfast table with a grudging 'This is for you.'

Sophia opened it. Inside lay a tiny gold button, its front embellished with the figure of a deer. With careful fingers, she took it out and turned it this way and that, wondering for the thousandth time about its significance. Had it belonged to her mother? Was it a love token given by her father? A tremor of regret passed through her, as she realised that she would in all likelihood never know. She brought the tiny object to her lips and gave it a gentle kiss before replacing it in the box. Closing the lid, she tucked the box in her reticule. It was far too precious to place in the trunk.

Soon they were to be off to Falmouth where the Pridhams had their main house. Pulsing with excitement and anticipation, she wondered what it would be like. Bath had been a revelation, with all its bustle and crowds; now she was going to the coast and would see the sea for the very first time. At the age of twenty-two, her life was taking a miraculous turn.

Chapter 5



PHIL STRAIGHTENED HIS CRAVAT and glanced approvingly at his reflection in the mirror. His valet had done a pretty good job of making him look presentable. Taking up the reins as a respectable landowner and gentleman meant he had to keep up appearances now, unlike during his relatively carefree days in London.

‘Well done, Curnow. That looks satisfactory... very satisfactory indeed.’

‘Thank you, sir. I have been practising.’ The young man blushed. Curnow, a local lad, had originally been employed as a footman. When Phil had returned to Falmouth, he’d indicated to Stephens, the butler, that he’d be needing a valet, and the young man had been suggested as a possibility.

‘He’s keen to get on, sir,’ Stephens informed Phil. ‘He’s a good worker, doesn’t drink much, and not always chasing the girls.’

‘He’s your nephew, isn’t he, Stephens?’ Phil had responded with a grin.

Nevertheless, Phil had decided to take a chance on the lad, and it looked as if it was paying off. A final glance in the mirror told him he looked every inch the gentleman with his perfectly styled cravat, plain black coat, white satin waistcoat embroidered with gold thread, kerseymere breeches, white stockings, and shiny buckled shoes. He ran a hand through his hair, disturbing the perfection that Curnow had tried to impose on his short curling locks.

Curnow sighed loudly.

Twenty minutes later, Phil entered the crowded Falmouth Assembly Rooms, his eyes scanning the main room for anyone he recognised. People dressed in their best lined the sides, content to observe as the more energetic of their companions took to the floor. At the far side of the room, Phil spotted a huddle of naval uniforms and, deducing that his friend was sure to be where any naval men were gathered, started to thread his way through the throng. It was not easy to accomplish. At each step, he was hailed by gentlemen and their wives, all eager to introduce him to unmarried daughters, or sons who would be grateful for a word in the right ear. He smiled to himself. Coming back to his estate had turned him into a desirable person to know – such a difference to his situation in London when he had been pretending to be a humble man of business.

At last he reached his destination and, right enough, Admiral Pridham and his wife were at the centre of the group.

‘Ah, there you are, Mr Cullen.’ The admiral’s booming voice made his companions turn to observe the new addition to their circle.

‘Good evening, Admiral, Mrs Pridham.’ Phil bowed.

‘Mr Cullen, let me introduce you. This is Captain Manson, Commander Repton, and Lieutenants Ashdown and Jenson. Gentlemen, this is Mr Philip Cullen. Mr Cullen owns one of the largest estates here in the South West.’ Phil nodded, and the gentlemen each shook Phil’s hand in turn. Lieutenant Ashdown’s grip was vice-like, and although his mouth curved in a smile, his grey eyes were cold.

Determined not to display any weakness, though his curiosity was piqued as to why the lieutenant had taken him in dislike, Phil smiled back at him before turning to Mrs Pridham.

‘How are you, Mrs Pridham? Your husband has been telling me that you’ve had a pleasant stay in Bath and are now fully restored to health.’

Dimpling, Mrs Pridham tapped him on the hand with her closed fan.

‘Mr Cullen, indeed. My husband is very indiscreet to tell you that I have been unwell.’

The admiral grunted. ‘Daresay I’m for the brig now.’

Mrs Pridham laughed. ‘And so you should be, Admiral. It seems you have been boring poor Mr Cullen with stories about me. You should ignore him, Mr Cullen.’

‘I assure you, ma’am, your husband did not bore me. He merely mentioned that you had been out of sorts. But I am delighted to see you back in Falmouth and looking as charming as ever.’

‘Well, you do flatter me, sir. Though I have to say, every lady enjoys a little flattery once in a while.’ She held out her arm. ‘Now, would you do me a kindness and escort me to the refreshment room? I do believe my husband wishes to talk naval matters with these gentlemen.’

Phil caught Ashdown’s quickly erased smirk. Perhaps the lieutenant didn’t enjoy socialising with non-naval folk and was pleased that the intruder to their group was being removed. Phil bent his elbow for Mrs Pridham to take, and with a ‘By your leave, sir’ to the admiral, he led Mrs Pridham towards the door to the refreshment room.

‘Well, I apologise for monopolising you, Mr Cullen,’ said Mrs Pridham as Phil handed her a glass of wine. They had taken a table in the quieter room where drinks and dainty pastries were being served. ‘I’m afraid I was getting quite annoyed at those encroaching lieutenants. They have haunted our house ever since their ship anchored here last week, according to my husband. Even my arrival home the other day did not deter them from calling; both men are completely thick-skinned.’

Phil wasn’t sure how to take this sharing of confidence.

‘I’m sure they are merely keen for advancement and probably believe your husband can put in a word for them at the Admiralty.’

Mrs Pridham pulled a face.

‘Hmm, I suppose. For all their seeming friendship for each other, they are not very loyal. Why, Lieutenant Jenson confided to my husband that the men under

Ashdown's command do not like him. He stands too much on his aristocratic rank, apparently. He is the son of an earl, you know?' She leaned in and whispered, 'According to Jenson, their captain has said Ashdown is no more use to him as an officer than his pet dog, and not so near entertaining!'

Phil burst out laughing, and his companion chuckled, a wicked twinkle in her eye. 'Oh dear, now I am being indiscreet, am I not?'

'Never fear, ma'am. I will not repeat a word of it. Though I will not be able to look at him in quite the same way again.'

Unfurling her fan, Mrs Pridham wafted it about her face for several seconds before speaking again.

'Well, Mr Cullen, my real reason for taking you apart from our group was to request the pleasure of your company at a small dinner I am giving next week. I did not wish to feel obliged to extend the invitation to all the gentlemen present, though of course I will be inviting Captain Manson and his wife. Do say you will join us, sir. It is so refreshing not to hear about naval matters all the time and' – she gave him a shrewd look – 'I understand that you and my husband are engaged on some particular work, so it will be an opportunity for you to meet discreetly without the eyes of Falmouth upon you.'

Phil coughed as his drink went down the wrong way.

'I beg your pardon, ma'am.' He hadn't expected her to know about this secret business.

She leaned towards him, hiding her mouth with her fan.

'It sometimes suits to affect the air of a muddle-headed female, Mr Cullen. You'd be surprised what indiscretions people let slip when they think they are talking to a simple woman who is only interested in domestic matters.'

Phil raised his glass in salute. 'You are a veritable asset to the country, ma'am.'

Mrs Pridham acknowledged his compliment with a wry smile and a flutter of her eyelashes.

'I also have another reason for inviting you, sir.'

Phil raised a questioning eyebrow. Mrs Pridham hadn't struck him as a flirt.

'I have a young lady staying with me. A sweet girl, intelligent, and not at all the usual.' Phil's spirits slumped. Surely the admiral's wife was not trying to play matchmaker? Admiral Pridham had not been joking when he'd spoken of finding him a wife. That was the last thing he needed. 'I see by your expression that you think I am trying to pair you off.' Mrs Pridham gave an exasperated sigh. 'You couldn't be more wrong, Mr Cullen.'

'Of course you're not, Mrs Pridham. I never thought that for a moment,' he lied.

'That's as may be.' Mrs Pridham took a dainty sip from her glass, a thoughtful look on her face. 'No, what I am asking is that you perhaps invite her out for an excursion into Falmouth and introduce her to some suitable people of your acquaintance. Poor girl has been sadly treated by her guardian. She has no friends

of her own age. At present, she is acting as my companion. After much prompting from the admiral – silly man thought I needed my spirits lifting and required a young person's company – I contacted a dear friend who recommended the girl. Well, she has been like a breath of fresh air. I almost feel as if I have my own dear Kitty at home with me again.' Mrs Pridham settled her gloved hand on Phil's arm and sent him an imploring glance. 'Do say you will help, Mr Cullen.'

Phil knew when he was beaten. How could he resist the charming but resolute silver-haired lady with twinkling grey eyes?

'Of course, ma'am. It will be my pleasure. Is she not with you this evening?'

Mrs Pridham's smile faltered. 'The poor dear is unwell. I rather think it was something she ate at one of the inns we stopped at on the way back from Bath. My maid has the same ailment.' Mrs Pridham sighed. 'I felt quite bad at leaving her, but she insisted that I join the admiral this evening. Such a considerate girl.'

They chatted on, and before long Admiral Pridham came to collect his wife and Phil was free to mingle with other friends and acquaintances. He danced two sets with the sisters of two of his gentlemen friends. They were both happily betrothed, so he knew he was safe from the machinations of parents looking for matrimonial prospects. Feeling brave, he also danced a cotillion with a pleasant-looking young lady, the unattached daughter of a wealthy Falmouth merchant. Alas, what brief conversation they managed during the course of the dance showed her to be insipid and altogether too docile. She agreed with everything he said about the weather, the town, the refreshments. For devilment, he mentioned that he thought the music was too loud, and she agreed with that. At the end of the set, he handed her back to her smiling mama with a feeling of relief and hastily excused himself. Were there no females of intelligence in Falmouth?

Phil played a couple of hands of cards in the adjoining card room before deciding that there was no interesting gossip to be picked up by staying longer. He got ready to depart and was heading for the door when he was halted by the arrival of a new group. At the group's centre was a woman, whose face he couldn't see, dressed expensively in purple silks and a matching turban. Although slim and of middling stature, by the creases on her neck he knew she was not in the first flush of youth, but the young naval gentlemen about her seemed entranced. Phil noticed Lieutenants Ashdown and Jenson were of their number.

Jenson, seeing Phil, waved to him.

'Mr Cullen, may I present you to a new member of Falmouth society? Mrs Harris has but recently arrived, and I am trying to persuade her that her presence will be an adornment to all the social events held hereabouts.'

Phil almost didn't hear Jenson's words. He was staring at the woman, who was fluttering her eyelashes and whispering into Ashdown's ear. A cold shiver ran down his spine. It couldn't be. She was dead, or so he'd been told. The woman finished her endearments and turned her head to look straight at Phil. He tensed

as he found himself gazing into the hard, dark eyes of Ruth Newbody.

She smiled at him. 'Ah, another young gentleman. But you are not a naval officer, are you, sir? I do so like to see a man in uniform, so distinguished.' She gave a husky laugh that sent her admirers into amused titters and more shivers up Phil's spine. There was no flicker of recognition in her gaze. The only time they'd met she'd barely glanced at him, and he'd made certain to stay in the background. He plastered a smile on his face.

'Alas, madam, you are correct. I am not a naval man.' He bowed, quelling his desire to take her by the neck. 'Philip Cullen at your service, ma'am. Lieutenant Jenson says you are recently arrived in these parts?'

Under hooded eyes, she gazed up at him, her tongue sliding provocatively across her painted upper lip.

'Indeed, Mr Cullen. I have taken a house in the Greenbank part of town. It has beautiful views over the estuary. The air in Birmingham was getting quite stale – there are far too many manufactories there now – and I decided I needed a change.' She tittered, making Phil's hands curl into fists at his sides. 'Perhaps you might care to see the view from my drawing room, sir?' Her closed fan was now placed flirtatiously against her cheek. 'I should be delighted if you would call on me one day.'

'I'm sure I would too, ma'am. Enjoy your evening.' He bowed again and made his way to the door. He needed to see Admiral Pridham, and fast.



The following morning, Phil was up early and galloping over to the Pridhams' elegant house situated just a mile or so outside Falmouth. By the time he'd reached the ballroom last night, it was evident that the couple had already departed, and he didn't want to follow them home in his own carriage; it would draw far too much attention. Now, however, even though it was early, what would be more natural than to pay a call on one of his neighbours?

His card was accepted by the butler, and he was shown into a charming sitting room. Instructions had obviously been given that Phil should be admitted no matter what the hour, for there was none of that 'I'll see if he is at home' nonsense. Phil settled into a chair, picked up an old copy of the *Gazette* lying on the table, and forced himself to relax. His nerves were still at full stretch, knowing Mrs Newbody was alive and well and living in Falmouth. The print danced before his eyes as he tried to control his thoughts. He was still staring blankly at the first page when the sound of the door opening caused him to look up. The second person whom he'd never expected to see again was standing in the doorway, neatly overturning all his notions of females being the weaker sex. He'd thought Mrs Pridham was an exception, but in less than twelve hours he'd discovered that Ruth Newbody had bamboozled her hunters into thinking she was dead, and here

was Miss Hart without a hair out of place and seemingly landed on her feet. Had he got it all wrong?

‘You! What are you doing here?’ There was shock in Sophia’s eyes as she remained rigid by the door, her knuckles white around the door handle.

Phil flung the *Gazette* down and shot out of his seat.

‘I might ask you the same.’ Anger, and something like relief, flooded through him. He wasn’t sure whether he was going to shake her or embrace her. ‘That was a terrible trick you played me, miss. Why did you run away?’ He moved closer, until they were standing mere inches apart, still trying to get his confused emotions under control. She did not flinch, but instead stood her ground. He was close enough to breathe in her scent of jasmine. ‘Mrs Dobson was distraught at the thought that you might have come to harm.’

She winced, then countered with a whispered, ‘I left a note... I didn’t think anyone would really be bothered by my absence.’

‘Aye, you did leave a note... not that it explained much. Did you not think that the poor lady would be worried about you?’

‘I did not expect anyone to care. Very few people—’

He didn’t let her finish. ‘And I discover that you are now living under an assumed name, fooling more innocent people into caring for you.’

Anger flashed in her eyes.

‘How dare you! I am not living under an assumed name.’ Her cheeks flushed a becoming pink. ‘I gave you a false one.’ He snorted, to which she replied, ‘Did you honestly think I would give my real name to a gentleman I didn’t know and whom I wasn’t sure I could trust?’

The taut muscles in Phil’s neck relaxed. She had a point.

‘Well, who are you, and what is your real story?’

‘My name is Sophia Turner. Everything else I told you was true. Until I was bamboozled by Mrs Newbody into accompanying her to London, I’d never travelled further than the market town of Witney, with only the occasional visit to Oxford. There. Satisfied?’ With her hands on her hips and her eyes glaring, she reminded him of an enraged kitten. Then the light went out of her eyes.

‘I expect you’re going to tell Admiral and Mrs Pridham that I am not a respectable female, and then I shall be dismissed.’

Before he could answer, she pushed past him and slumped down onto the nearest chair. No longer fired up with temper, she was the picture of dejection. ‘What is to become of me now? That awful woman has ruined my life.’

Phil, his anger dissipated, hesitated only a moment before placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. While he could handle her anger, he couldn’t deal with despair. ‘Please don’t cry. I’m sure it won’t...’ His stomach gave a lurch. Good God, he needed to warn her about Mrs Newbody’s presence in Falmouth. What a coil it all was.

Before he could open his mouth, gruff tones were heard coming down the hall. 'Thought I heard voices...'

Phil turned to see a frowning Admiral Pridham standing in the open doorway.

'Miss Turner... Sophia. Are you all right?' The admiral's furious eyes turned to Phil. 'This gentleman...' Phil flinched at the admiral's accusing look. 'He hasn't been bothering you, has he? Really, Cullen, this is the outside of enough.'

Before Phil could defend himself, Sophia's softly spoken words drew his attention back to her panic-stricken face.

'No, no, you've got it wrong, Admiral,' she said.

Phil, his mind racing, cut in.

'Miss Turner was just telling me how much she is enjoying being here when she was suddenly overcome by a sharp pain.' He turned back to Sophia, praying she would pick up on his cue. Now was not the time for her to confess to her past, or for him to reveal Mrs Newbody's presence in Falmouth. Emotions were running too high. 'How are you now, Miss Turner? Mrs Pridham told me you were quite unwell last night.'

She covered her surprise well. 'M-much better, I thank you, sir. It has passed now.'

Admiral Pridham's frown disappeared.

'Get yourself back to bed, miss. That's an order. I'll let Emmaline know you're still out of sorts.' He flashed an apologetic smile at Phil as Sophia slipped out of the room. 'Sorry about that.' He cleared his throat. 'Misunderstood the situation. Can't be too careful with such a pretty lass. Emmaline would have me keel-hauled should anything untoward happen to Sophia while she's in our care. Too many of those young naval chaps calling... shall have to put a stop to it. They're all mad for female company. Only to be expected, I suppose. All those months at sea.' He winked at Phil. 'Managed to keep them away from her up to now. You're the first one to meet her.'

The tension in Phil's shoulders disappeared. His ruse had worked. With luck, Sophia would say nothing to Admiral and Mrs Pridham until he'd had a chance to consult with her. And see her soon he must, before she discovered Mrs Newbody... or worse, Mrs Newbody discovered her. The likelihood was that Sophia would remain closeted at home for the next few days, for the admiral seemed very solicitous of her health. He would therefore arrange to take her for a drive within the next day or so, for it was highly unlikely that a trip into Falmouth would be planned for the ladies while Sophia was in such delicate health. Comforted by these thoughts, Phil turned his attention wholly back to the admiral, who fortunately had been preoccupied by the search for his pipe – an object eventually located in the depths of the admiral's capacious pocket.

Pipe now clutched in his hand, Admiral Pridham gestured Phil to a chair as he made his unhurried way to the fireplace. Here, he plucked a spill from a porcelain

container on the mantelpiece, took a light from the fire, and proceeded to set it to the tobacco-filled bowl. Phil quelled his impatience, even though he was bursting to reveal his news.

Finally, after puffing contentedly for several seconds, and now settled in his chair, the admiral spoke.

‘A rum do the other evening, Mr Cullen. All those young naval chaps went off sniffing after that Mrs Harris. She’s the newcomer you told me about. Finally made her entrance. Bit long in the tooth, if you ask me, and too much artifice. Not Emmaline’s sort at all.’ He paused for another draw on his pipe. ‘Did you see her, my boy?’

Phil moved to the edge of his seat. ‘That’s what I’ve come to see you about.’

It took only minutes for Phil to apprise the admiral of Mrs Harris’ background and her true identity. He omitted all mention of her connection to Sophia. He wasn’t going to be the one to ruin the girl’s chances of a settled, respectable life. Sophia’s life would be ruined in any case, if Mrs Newbody caught sight of her. Phil didn’t believe for one moment that the woman would do nothing once she knew Sophia was living in Falmouth. She’d trapped and imprisoned her once, for what real reason he couldn’t fathom, and everything he’d been told about Newbody’s character indicated that she was persistent and ruthless. Clever too. She’d even fooled his superiors in London into believing her dead. Yes, he could now quite understand how such a woman could become the ringleader of a spy network.

‘Well, what luck. We’ve located our spy.’ The admiral beamed. ‘And everyone thinking she was dead. She’s got nerve, I’ll give her that, taking a risk that no-one here will know her.’ He leaned forward to Phil, a triumphant gleam in his eye. ‘Such serendipity that you should be here now and one of the few people able to identify her. She’s quite fallen into our laps. If it wasn’t for you, Phil, I’d have been concentrating my search only on the gentlemen. Who’d have thought a female would be our objective?’

‘I’m beginning to suspect that females are far more intelligent than we give them credit for,’ was Phil’s wry response. Yes, his recent experiences were teaching him not to underestimate females. Thanks to Ruth Newbody, Mrs Pridham, and now Sophia, he was going to have to adjust his long-held beliefs.



Sophia couldn’t get out of the door fast enough. Her heart was beating like a drum, and she wasn’t certain her legs would continue to hold her up for as long as she needed to reach her room. But reach it she did, and with shaking fingers she locked the door behind her and flung herself onto the bed.

A few deep breaths and she was soon back in control of her emotions. Years of living with Mrs Archer had taught Sophia that crying was a waste of time. Only

with Hannah, whose warmth and motherly tenderness had come as something of a shock to a young girl deprived of love, had Sophia dared to occasionally expose her inner feelings.

Sophia sat up, rubbed at her eyes, and tried to order her thoughts. Her life once again was crashing down around her. She might have guessed that the joy of living with Mrs Pridham and her husband would not last forever.

Her insides curled in shame at the fact that Mr Cullen had witnessed her temporary weakness. What was he doing in Falmouth anyway? The sight of him, as handsome as ever, perusing the newspaper in the parlour and looking quite at home had almost expelled all the air from her lungs. Had he discovered her whereabouts and come on purpose to expose her past? She frowned. No, that couldn't be it. Why would he have manufactured an excuse to explain her discomfiture to Admiral Pridham if he'd wanted to do that?

Her stomach lurched.

Did he intend to blackmail her? It took only seconds to dismiss that possibility. He wouldn't have much luck there: she had no money. Another thought occurred to her, causing shivers to go down her spine. He couldn't possibly want... sexual favours, could he? Anger rose in her chest. Never! No matter how handsome he was – and he was, she admitted to herself, very attractive in a dark, saturnine way – she would never trade her favours, not to him or anyone. She had her principles. Mrs Newbody had tried to convince her and failed, and nothing he might say, or threaten her with, was going to change her mind.

Wrapping her arms around her chest, she told herself there was no point in agonising over what Mr Cullen might or might not do. No point in rushing into precipitate action. She would just have to wait to discover what he did want.

Calm settled over her at last. Still feeling rather weak from her illness of the previous day, she decided to take the admiral's advice. A giggle escaped her. He'd said it was an order. Well, she had to obey an order, didn't she? With the counterpane pulled over her legs, she lay back on the plumped-up pillows and tried to concentrate on the book that Emmaline had lent her.

Chapter 6



A FURTHER DAY'S REST improved not only Sophia's body but also her spirits. She hadn't been tossed out of the house, which could only mean that Mr Cullen had so far kept her secret to himself. At breakfast, everything was as normal. Emmaline chatted animatedly and shared details of a letter she'd received from her daughter. Sophia enjoyed hearing about Kitty's life in Deptford as a navy wife. Folding the letter up at last, when all its contents had been discussed and devoured, a suspiciously bright-eyed Emmaline suggested that they'd both benefit from an excursion into Falmouth.

'You're sure to enjoy it, and the sea air will do you good. I was never ill when I was at sea with the admiral.'

Sophia smiled back at her employer, who was surreptitiously dabbing at her eye with a corner of her handkerchief. 'I'm sure I will, Emmaline. I'm so excited to see the sea at last.' This was no lie. Although she'd seen many pictures of the sea, Sophia was convinced that seeing the real thing would be something else entirely. Now she was nearer to the coast than she'd ever been, and the change in the air, the difference in the light, and the sense that there was something vast just over the horizon were not figments of her imagination, of that she was sure.

Emmaline looked up from buttering a slice of bread. Her handkerchief had now been tucked away.

'I'd quite forgotten that you've never seen the sea. I've been lucky to live by the coast all my life, and of course when I married Admiral Pridham, much of my life was spent on the waves.' She set the butter knife down and sighed theatrically. 'Alas, now I'm a veritable landlubber.'

They both burst into giggles, Sophia thinking herself lucky that her employer was such a likeable female, and so like her dear friend Hannah.

Emmaline had plans for their day, which she proceeded to share.

'We can take the road past Pendennis Castle. You get a really good view from there over the entire harbour and across to St Mawes. There is a respectable inn where we can stop for refreshments in the town itself, and I can send a note to the admiral to meet us. He will be able to give us a tour of the quays, where you can see the ships. He is often about there, in any case, speaking to his friends.' Emmaline shook her head. 'I really don't know how he'd manage if we had to move away from the coast. The man has salt water in his veins.'

Sophia guessed that Emmaline would find life just as difficult. Her animation when talking about Falmouth and the ships spoke volumes about her love of the

sea.

‘At what age did Admiral Pridham join the navy, ma’am? Was he very young?’ Sophia had heard boys as young as eight years were taken on board as part of the crew.

‘Indeed. He comes from a seafaring family, although his father did not achieve the same exalted rank. Dear Pridham joined as a midshipman when he was fourteen and progressed steadily through the ranks until he was given command of his first ship. He was at Trafalgar, you know?’ Mrs Pridham’s eyes misted. ‘Our greatest victory... but also our saddest when we lost dear Lord Nelson. Such a gallant man, and a good patron to my Priddy.’



The day was perfect for an excursion. White clouds scudded across a bright blue sky and a steady breeze was coming from the sea. Emmaline instructed the coachman to halt at a good vantage point, where she and Sophia were able to disembark in order to take in the view of Falmouth and its harbour laid out beneath them.

‘How beautiful it is,’ murmured Sophia, almost to herself, as she held on to her hat. She swivelled her head to take in the prospect of the open sea with its white-tipped waves fading into the distance where it met the sky. Turning to look at St Mawes Castle on the opposite side of the bay, her gaze was drawn back to the town of Falmouth almost beneath them. The entire vista was even better than she expected: exhilarating, exciting, and filling her with a sense of all things being possible. The harbour was crowded with bobbing three-masted ships, and Emmaline pointed out that most of them were flying the royal pennant. Other ships weaved across the bay, skimming across the water with the grace of birds.

‘I knew you would like it,’ said Emmaline with an approving smile. ‘There’s nothing quite like a sea town, with all its bustle and comings and goings. Give me Falmouth any day over your London. Ah, but I’m forgetting, you have never been to London, have you? Such a dirty, odiferous place.’

Sophia felt herself blushing. ‘No, I haven’t.’ Oh, how she hated lying. Fortunately, Emmaline, whose own eyes were glued to the view of the harbour, didn’t notice Sophia’s flushed cheeks.

‘Well, take it from me, you don’t want to go there if you can help it. Falmouth is not perfect, with its crowded courts and alleyways... and you must be certain to never wander down any of those, Sophia. But I must say, I feel a great deal safer here with all these naval gentlemen and militia about than ever I did when I had the misfortune to visit London.’

Emmaline caught Sophia’s arm. ‘Come on, we shall continue into town and spend a pleasant hour or two.’ They made their way back to the waiting coach, where Emmaline paused briefly before climbing in. ‘Smell that air, Sophia. Isn’t it

glorious?’

Sophia grinned, still clutching on to her hat that had very nearly been torn away by a sharp gust. ‘It is indeed, ma’am.’



It was far less windy in the town itself, making Sophia grateful that she did not need to continue with one hand on her hat. They traversed the cobbled roads until they came to the high street, with Mrs Pridham guiding Sophia and pointing out places of interest. As they walked, they were frequently greeted by officers resplendent in cocked hats and colourful uniforms, acquaintances of Mrs Pridham’s who wished to ask after her husband. More than one gave Sophia a lingering look, but Mrs Pridham dealt with them all briskly.

‘I have some other gentlemen in mind to whom I wish to introduce you, my dear,’ Emmaline whispered behind her hand as they strolled on. ‘Those officers were off the packet ships, wealthy, I grant you, but I wish you to make the acquaintance of Royal Navy officers.’ Sophia swallowed and nodded meekly, thinking it best not to argue or mention again that she wasn’t seeking a husband.

They passed an impressive building, which Emmaline identified as the town hall. Further along, she pointed out another building with a columned façade.

‘Those are the Assembly Rooms, where the admiral and I were the other evening when you were unwell. Such a pity, you would have enjoyed it, my dear.’ She gave Sophia a mischievous smile. ‘So many young naval officers to dance attendance on you.’

‘Oh, ma’am. I truly am not looking for a husband.’ Sophia’s words came blurring out. How could she marry? She’d have to confess to her past.

‘Hmm.’ Emmaline did not hide her disbelief.

After a moment’s uncomfortable silence, during which Sophia wondered if she’d been too forthright, Emmaline changed the subject.

‘I did wonder at one time about taking this.’ Sophia’s eyes followed to where Emmaline pointed with a gloved finger at a large, brick townhouse. ‘As you see, it faces straight on to Custom House Quay. However, I decided that it would be far too noisy to be situated here.’

Sophia gazed down the lane leading to the quay. ‘So many ships, ma’am. Is it always this busy?’

‘Bless you, my dear. Yes, it is.’ Emmaline chuckled. ‘Most of those are packet ships come from all over the world: Malta, Lisbon, the Americas. I have good reason to think we receive news here well before anybody in London. They dock here at this quay or up the way at Greenbank at the other end of the town.’ There was another tug on Sophia’s sleeve as Emmaline changed direction. ‘But we’ll give it a wide berth for now. I don’t like to venture there without the admiral. It is very busy, and I do not want to lose you in the crowds.’

As Emmaline spoke, a woman brushed past them, staggering under the weight of a heavy satchel slung round her neck and nearly knocking Sophia off her feet.

‘I beg yer pardon, miss. Me bag’s a bit loaded, see? Can barely walk upright.’ The woman bobbed awkwardly, peering with anxious eyes at Sophia.

‘I’m quite all right, I assure you.’ Sophia could see that the woman, who was poorly dressed and whose hollow cheeks and pale visage told a tale of their own, was concerned that she might be in trouble.

‘Take this and get yourself something to eat.’ Emmaline dropped some coins into the woman’s palm.

‘God bless you, ma’am.’ The woman put a hand to her head in acknowledgement before recommencing her trudge up the high street.

‘One of the trosyers,’ said Emmaline.

‘Pardon?’ Sophia had never heard the word before.

‘A pedlar woman. They meet the seamen off the packet ships and journey on foot around the villages to sell any goods the men bring back. The crewmen are usually allowed a little leeway by Customs and Excise, and they do not pay duty on it.’ Emmaline patted Sophia’s arm. ‘The packet-ship captains are generally wealthy men, but the common seamen need the extra money to supplement their wages.’

Sophia looked around. The street was crowded with affluent gentlemen and their finely dressed ladies, no doubt passengers of the packet ships. The colourful uniforms of the packet-ship captains vied with the splendour of Royal Navy officers, all epaulettes, lace cuffs, and shiny gold buttons. Seamen in their slops of short blue jackets and wide white trousers contrasted sharply with barefooted landmen wearing homespun or rags. Apart from the abundance of seafaring uniforms, she thought it almost resembled London street society with its contrast of rich and poor. At least there was no Mrs Newbody here to threaten her.

After walking for a while longer and stopping in various shops to make some small purchases, Emmaline decided it was time for some refreshment. ‘The respectable tavern I told you about is just along here. I’ll bespeak us a private parlour and ask the landlord to send a boy with a message for the admiral.’

Sophia followed her employer into an old-fashioned but tidy-looking inn. Emmaline was obviously well known in these parts, for the landlord swiftly joined them and led them to a pleasant parlour. ‘My Annie will be with you in a moment, ma’am, and I’ll send my lad Jack to you just as soon as he returns from the stables.’

Before long, the boy Jack was sent off with a message to the admiral, who was visiting the custom house, and Emmaline bespoke them some savoury patties, meat pies, cheese, and bread. At Sophia’s look of surprise – for she was still replete from her breakfast – Emmaline explained.

‘The admiral will want something substantial, no doubt, when he joins us. The

man neglects to eat if I do not prompt him. He left quite early this morning, and I daresay he barely broke his fast.' She settled herself on a bench under the parlour window, which looked out on to the busy street. 'Come, let us sit here, Sophia, where we can entertain ourselves by watching the world go by while we wait.'

Sophia took off her hat and sat down at the other end of the bench, so that she and Emmaline both had a view of the bustle outside through the salt-encrusted windows. Emmaline commented on the uniforms passing by, pointing out the different ranks to a mystified Sophia.

'See that gentleman there with an epaulette on each shoulder? He has made post and commands a ship. His companion has also earned his own command but has less seniority. Now, how do I know that, Sophia?'

Sophia watched as the two officers walked past, feeling guilty at making such close and unseemly observations of them. 'Erm... Oh, I see it now. He only wears an epaulette on his right shoulder.'

'Very good.' Emmaline smiled. 'We shall make a naval wife of you yet, my dear.'

Sophia smiled but said nothing.

The food was brought in, but the ladies ignored it, in order to carry on their observations. Suddenly, Emmaline's face brightened.

'Ah, here he is at last.' Her smile was quickly replaced by a frown. 'Oh dear, now he will be delayed while he exchanges pleasantries. So inconvenient that she should cross his path just now.'

Sophia looked out to where Admiral Pridham was standing. He was doffing his hat to a smartly dressed female whose broad-brimmed hat obscured her face from view. She was accompanied by a young, dark-skinned maid carrying several bandboxes. There was something in the older woman's attitude that seemed familiar. Prickles of apprehension ran down Sophia's spine. The woman turned and Sophia saw her take the admiral's arm. He pointed to the inn, and they both walked on together. As they drew closer, his companion's face came into full view. Sophia's breath caught in her lungs. Dear Lord, it was Mrs Newbody.

Sophia's eyes lost focus, and her heart was pounding in her chest so loudly she was sure Emmaline would hear it as she clutched the table to stop herself from sliding off the bench.

'Whatever is the matter, Sophia? You look quite ill.' Emmaline's concerned words barely registered as Sophia struggled to get a grip on her shattered nerves. 'Lie down there for a moment.' Emmaline gently pushed her down onto the cushions of the bench. Sophia did not resist, thinking it might be wise to do as Emmaline instructed. With luck, Emmaline would also prevent the admiral bringing his companion into their parlour. To be truthful, Sophia did feel quite light-headed. If she could have a moment of quiet, an idea might come to mind.

Alas, matters didn't go as she wished. A commotion at the door heralded the

admiral's arrival, and voices vied with each other for attention. Sophia caught the sound of Emmaline's calm command for a maid, then the admiral's booming tones repeating her command. Sophia kept her eyes closed amidst the rustling and footsteps around her, praying that all the fuss would send Mrs Newbody on her way.

A few moments later, Sophia's nose began to twitch, and her throat began to catch. What was that awful smell? Through water-filled, stinging eyes and a haze of smoke, she saw the burning feather being held under her nose.

'There, there. Stay still a moment, dear, until your head settles,' came Emmaline's soothing voice. 'It's my fault for bringing you out too early. You've not got a strong constitution, have you, Sophia?'

Guilt swept through Sophia at these words. She had felt faint, but she was nowhere near as frail as Emmaline believed.

A maid's head bobbed over Emmaline's shoulder. 'Is she all right now, ma'am? Do you still need me to fetch the hartshorn?'

Emmaline shooed the maid away. 'No, I think we will be quite all right now, thank you, although I have ruined a perfectly good hat.'

Sophia groaned at the trouble her subterfuge was causing. Mistaking the reason, Emmaline chuckled and said in a bracing tone, 'Come along, Sophia. It was my poor attempt at a jest. Feathers are easy to come by – good companions are not.' She squinted down at Sophia, a frown creasing her brow. 'But we must get you home. I knew I should have dosed you with more Daffy's elixir. You're still not quite recovered, are you?'

'Is the young lady feeling better?' a horribly familiar husky voice inquired from across the room, sending Sophia's insides curling in terror.

Emmaline stood up. 'Admiral, I'm afraid I must take Sophia home. I think our little venture today was too much for her, as she is not quite recovered from her recent illness. I'm sorry to leave you so abruptly, Mrs Harris, but needs must, as you'll agree.'

'Of course, my dear.' It was the admiral who spoke. 'I'll go and call the carriage.'

A rustling of silk was heard, and Sophia peered at the face looming above her. The woman was definitely Ruth Newbody, but Emmaline had called her Mrs Harris. Their eyes locked.

'She does look rather under the weather.' Mrs Newbody's mouth curled up into a smile, but her glittering eyes remained hard. 'I hope you feel better soon, my dear.' She turned to Emmaline. 'Such a pity. I was so pleased when Admiral Pridham invited me to join you. We spent such a short time conversing the other evening, and I was hoping to get to know you better.'

'Perhaps another time, when Miss Turner is fully recovered...' Emmaline's answer was non-committal.

‘Of course.’ Mrs Newbody seemed unconcerned at the lack of enthusiasm, for she continued in persuasive tones. ‘You must come and pay a visit, Mrs Pridham. I have taken a most charming house on Dunstanville Terrace, and as the admiral tells me that you have been pining for the sea, you will appreciate the fine views I have of it from my sitting-room window.’

From beneath lowered lashes, Sophia watched, heart hammering in her chest, until Mrs Newbody stepped out of view. ‘I hope to see you soon, Mrs Pridham. And do bring your lovely companion with you. Such a sweet-looking girl.’ There was a theatrical sigh. ‘She reminds me so much of someone I knew whose company I was parted from in *most* distressing circumstances. It would be a comfort to me to spend some time with someone who bears such a close likeness to her.’ There was another rustle of silk. ‘Come along, Tandy, don’t dawdle, girl.’ The door of the parlour opened and closed, leaving Sophia alone with Emmaline.

Sophia felt sick to her stomach. Indeed, it had taken an effort of will for her not to cast up her accounts at Mrs Newbody’s chilling words. This couldn’t be happening. Things had been bad enough when Mr Cullen made his appearance. Now Mrs Newbody too? There was nothing for it – she was going to have to give up her position and run away again. But to where?

At last, Admiral Pridham returned with the welcome news that the carriage was ready and waiting. After some hushed conversation between him and his wife, Sophia and a grim-faced Emmaline departed the inn.

‘I’m sorry to be such a nuisance, Emmaline,’ Sophia apologised, guilt and shame threatening to overwhelm her. Oh, how she wanted to confide her troubles, but it was the thought of what could happen that kept stopping her. Confessing all to Emmaline might result in being thrown out with only the clothes on her back. Sophia’s instincts told her that Emmaline was not an unkind person, but she wasn’t entirely sure how her husband would react... and wives bowed to their husband’s wishes, didn’t they? Or so she’d been told by Mrs Archer.

After ensuring that Sophia was comfortably settled, Emmaline took Sophia’s hand in her own.

‘Don’t worry, my dear. We’ll get you back into bed, and you shall rest all day tomorrow. I want you to be well enough for the dinner I am giving tomorrow night.’

‘Oh, there is no need for me to attend, surely?’ Sophia wasn’t sure her nerves could cope with a social occasion – and what if Mrs Newbody was to be present?

Emmaline’s voice was kind but firm. ‘I want you to be there, Sophia, so please do not argue. If you’re unwell, then of course you need not attend, but we are going to do our best to help you recover.’ Emmaline frowned and shook her head. ‘I don’t understand it. You must have a particularly weak constitution. I’m of half a mind to consult a doctor, but I don’t think bleeding or cupping is the answer. In my experience, rest and a healthy diet usually sort out most ills.’

Sophia squirmed in her seat. The cure for her ills would be for Mrs Newbody to disappear out of her life, but that did not seem at all likely. She and Mr Cullen had both come back to haunt her. Would her past never be buried? Sophia stifled her desire to give in to despair, telling herself that crying and admitting defeat was not her style. She needed to stay strong and cope with whatever life threw at her. Out of the window, she took comfort from the sight of the sea sparkling below as the carriage wound its way up and along the coast road out of Falmouth.

So engrossed was she in her thoughts that she nearly missed Emmaline's words.

'I'm not a little annoyed that the admiral brought that encroaching female into our parlour. I do not know what it is, but I do not like her.' Emmaline sniffed. 'However, he has indicated that we should be sociable towards her. I suppose he must have his reasons, but goodness me...' Emmaline's mouth clamped shut, as if she had been about to say something else.

Sophia wondered at Admiral Pridham's questionable taste in women.

Chapter 7



SOPHIA SPENT THE ENTIRETY of that afternoon and evening in her room, alternately lying on the bed and pacing backwards and forwards in front of the window and trying to decide what to do. By dinner time, her head ached abominably, and a concerned Emmaline was forced to administer some willow-bark tea.

‘That’s a good girl. Drink it quickly and you’ll not notice the bitter taste,’ Emmaline ordered. ‘Kitty always hated it, but she invariably felt better afterwards.’ The older lady folded her arms and let out a sigh. ‘I do dislike seeing you like this. It seems that the Falmouth air is not having the restorative effect on you that I’d hoped.’

Emmaline looked so glum that Sophia was forced to reassure her.

‘Oh no, ma’am. I’m sure the air will do me good. I just need to get over this stomach ailment, then I’ll be as fine as ninepence.’ And I need to come up with a plan, she told herself.

Her words had the desired effect. Emmaline’s downcast look disappeared, and her face crinkled into a smile.

‘That’s probably it. Try and get some sleep, and I’ll see you in the morning.’ As she reached the door, fingers on the handle, Emmaline twirled round. ‘Something to cheer you, my dear. I almost forgot to tell you. Mr Cullen, the gentleman whom I believe you met the other day, has sent a note to say he would very much like to take you for an outing tomorrow afternoon, if you are recovered.’

The dim light afforded by the single candle on the bedside table did not permit Emmaline to see the colour drain from Sophia’s face, so she continued, unaware of the effect of her words. ‘Admiral Pridham confided that Mr Cullen was most concerned when you were taken ill. Apparently, he thinks the fresh air might do you some good.’ She sent Sophia a mischievous grin. ‘Such a personable gentleman, Sophia. Not a naval officer, alas, but he’s quite plump in the pocket, according to my husband.’ The door closed behind her, leaving Sophia alone.

Sophia thumped her pillow. What on earth did Mr Cullen want? Was it possible to expect him to help her again? He’d come to her assistance once, but he now had every right to abandon her to her fate. He’d looked so... she wasn’t sure what. But there’d been something simmering behind his eyes when she’d admitted that she’d lied to him. Could her suspicions about his motives for not disclosing her secrets be mistaken? Well, there was only one way to find out – she would have to join him on tomorrow’s excursion. The thought sent a tingle of excitement and

anticipation through her.



‘I’m sorry to hear that you have been unwell again, Miss... erm, Turner.’

They were in Phil’s curricule, setting off down the drive towards the coast road. When he’d called at the admiral’s house, Mrs Pridham had informed him that Sophia was much improved and would be happy to accompany him. His eyes had widened in approval when Sophia came down the stairs looking pale but very attractive, it had to be said, in a navy-blue velvet carriage dress and matching Siberian cap. What a far cry from the bedraggled creature he’d first thought her in London.

‘I’m feeling much better now, thank you, sir.’ She looked up at him from under her lashes, a hint of trepidation in her eyes. In fact, he’d already formed the opinion that she was rather nervous when he’d seen her hand tremble before she’d placed it in his for him to assist her into the vehicle.

Need to handle this carefully, he told himself. Don’t want her to go off in hysterics when she learns that Mrs Newbody is in Falmouth. He guided the horses through the gate and on to the open road and set off in the direction of the coast.

‘I would prefer if we did not go into Falmouth, if you don’t mind, Mr Cullen.’ The quaver in Miss Turner’s voice drew his attention. Her head was down and her face obscured, but her hands gripped each other as if for dear life. He was not springing the horses. Why was she so tense? Not because of him, surely?

‘Why is that, Miss Turner? Had enough of the shops, or do they not compare to the ones in Bath?’

He’d meant to relax her with his light joking tone, but it seemed his words had had the opposite effect.

‘Please would you stop?’ Miss Turner’s soft voice now had a sharp edge.

Puzzled by this turn of events, he pulled on the reins to draw the team to a gentle trot before guiding them to a halt on the grass verge.

‘Whatever is the matter, Miss Turner? I did not mean to upset you.’ *That will come later, I’m sure.* Her next words came as something of a shock.

‘Just tell me what you want of me, sir. You must have some reason for not disclosing my past to the Pridhams.’ Her face was pale, but her back was straight as she turned accusing eyes on him.

‘What the...?’

Why did she persist in thinking the worst of him? Did the chit really believe he was an out-and-out villain? He might be somewhat unconventional, but he was always a gentleman. He replied through clenched teeth. ‘What do you take me for? I like to think of myself as an adventurer, but no lady has ever had reason to think me dishonourable, ma’am. What sauce!’

His irritation dissolved when he saw the flush of contrition in her cheeks. A

lump formed in his throat. Full of remorse for his harsh words, without thinking, he put his hand on her arm. Miss Turner's eyelashes fluttered, but she did not draw away.

'I apologise for my sharp words, ma'am. Won't you tell me what you have been thinking? I can assure you, I have nothing evil or of an unsavoury nature in mind.' His stomach gave a sudden lurch. Had she thought he was going to make demands of her for keeping her secrets? 'I give you my pledge, I will not disclose your past to anyone, certainly not without your permission.' Would that convince her that his intentions were honourable?

She swiped at her eyes with a gloved hand, so he handed her his linen handkerchief.

'Here. There's no reason to cry.' *Not yet at any rate, but that handkerchief might come in very useful shortly.*

Miss Turner blew her nose several times and sniffed. The tip of her nose turned charmingly pink.

'I must beg your pardon then, Mr Cullen. I'm afraid my experience with Mrs Newbody – and indeed my guardian, Mrs Archer – has given me a mistrust of people's motives. I assumed...'

Phil looked up at the cloudless sky; it really was a fine day, and he knew he shouldn't continue to gaze at Miss Turner's appealing, upturned face.

'Yes, well, we will not go into what you assumed.'

'I am also rather overset because of something else and... and I don't know what to do.' Her voice faltered. His eyes locked on to her face again, and he watched entranced as she caught at her lower lip with her teeth. When she wasn't raging at him, she was very attractive. He remembered that he still had his hand on her arm. He removed it and then wished he hadn't.

'Tell me what the problem is, and I will try to help.' *Before I upset you again with another problem.*

'It's Mrs Newbody... She's in Falmouth, and she knows I'm here too.'

'How...?' Stunned by the revelation that Mrs Newbody had somehow got wind of Miss Turner's whereabouts, he was about to question her further until he saw her face.

A tear ran down her cheek. She brushed it away. But it was quickly followed by another... then another. It was no good. He couldn't bear to see her so upset. He gathered her into his arms and cradled her soft curves against his chest. She did not resist but nestled into his side as if he were her only sanctuary.

It was strange. He'd never have considered himself hero material, but he'd decided that he needed to be a hero for Miss Turner. Many years ago, he'd missed the opportunity to rescue Mary Weston, a local girl who had run away from home. Her parents, friends of his uncle, had begged Phil to find her. But he'd been too late. By the time she'd been discovered, Mary had been abandoned by her

lover, was heavy with child, and near death. Neither mother nor child survived the birth. He'd vowed then that, given the opportunity, he would make up for his failure. And Miss Turner was his opportunity to assuage the guilt that had never left him. So, whether she wanted him to or not, he would ensure Sophia Turner's safety. And he wasn't going to fail this time.

He took a deep breath, and the scent of jasmine tickled his nose. He closed his eyes and breathed again, hearing the sound of his heart pounding in his chest – a sound so loud that he wondered if Miss Turner could hear it too. He was pleased that he'd not been the bearer of the news about Mrs Newbody. Miss Turner's distress had been painful to witness. He'd do all he could to protect her from pain and distress.

Even though they were both fully dressed, with several layers of clothing separating them, he felt the heat of her body against his. Somehow it felt right. Somehow it felt good. So good that he didn't want it to end. But all too soon, she pulled away from him, her eyes red-rimmed and cheeks flushed. The end of her nose was still pink. But not as pink as her lips, which were temptingly full and the colour of ripe cherries.

'I'm sorry. That was very forward of me. I do not usually...' Her words reminded him that they were in a public place and anyone might see them. He shuffled several inches away from her.

'Miss Turner, stop. There is no need to apologise.' He wasn't going to let her feel shame for what had just happened. 'You were overwrought, and justifiably so. In fact, the main purpose for my suggesting this excursion was to warn you privately of Mrs Newbody's presence in Falmouth.' He risked a quick glance at her face. 'She is calling herself Mrs Harris, by the way, but I expect you know that too.'

She opened her mouth to reply, but he ploughed on, determined to reassure her but also to warn her without revealing his secret role. 'I will help you in any way I can. But I must warn you. You need to stay away from her. She is a very dangerous woman.'

'Do you think I don't know that?' Miss Turner responded sharply.

It seemed the young woman was getting her spirit back.

'Peace, Miss Turner.' He held up his hand in a placatory gesture. 'Of course you know what she is capable of. I apologise for my words.' It wasn't often that he apologised, especially to a female. But in this case, he knew her intimate knowledge of Ruth Newbody was likely much greater than his own. He came to a decision. 'I think we need to discuss matters with Admiral Pridham.'

'No... you promised!' Miss Turner's face drained of all colour. 'Mrs Pridham will cast me out. I... I was going to tell her that urgent news from my erstwhile guardian meant I had to return home to Crawley.'

He arched an eyebrow. 'You mean you were going to run again?'

She looked away from him. 'I thought perhaps to salvage my reputation with her. Emmaline has been exceedingly kind, treating me more like a daughter than a companion. I didn't want her to think badly of me.'

'Surely, if she is as kind as you say, she will understand?' His acquaintance with Mrs Pridham wasn't of long duration, but he knew the woman was level-headed and kind-hearted, and not one of society's high sticklers. Admiral Pridham trusted her with his business, both open and covert. No, he could not believe Mrs Pridham would wash her hands of Miss Turner.

Miss Turner flung her hands in the air. 'Oh, I don't know. I'm so confused. My trust in people has been sadly dented, as I told you.'

He was torn between pulling her into his arms again and talking to her in bracing tones. For his own safety he chose the latter.

'Come, we will continue our drive. It will give you an opportunity to reflect and compose yourself. There are some other things I can tell you that perhaps will reassure you about the Pridhams.' Taking her silence as acquiescence, he resolutely flicked the reins, and they set off once more.

He congratulated himself. His tactics seemed to be working, for Miss Turner lapsed into silence.

It was some minutes before she spoke again. 'Isn't that Pendennis Castle?' She pointed towards the road leading up to the large fortress on the headland.

Glad that matters were back to normal between them, he answered with a smile. 'Yes, it is. Would you like to take a closer look? I'm sure Governor Melvill won't object to us visiting.' Phil had met the gentleman several times and had been impressed by his steady character.

'Oh, can we? I would like that very much.' Miss Turner smiled at him – a smile that sent the blood pulsing in his veins and nearly overturned his resolve to remain aloof. With grim determination, Phil turned his thoughts to the business of negotiating the turn up to the castle. After declaring their identities to the sentries, they were soon passing through the outer gates.



The afternoon was turning out rather differently than Sophia had expected. Mr Cullen wasn't the bounder that her imagination had painted; in fact, he'd been understanding and quite charming in his pledge to keep her secret. If only she could be as sure as he was that the Pridhams would not cast her out once they learned of her sojourn in London. She squirmed in her seat, recalling how she'd made a fool of herself by revealing her emotions. Mr Cullen would think her a complete ninnyhammer. The funny thing was, he hadn't shown any revulsion at her insipid behaviour, but he had put a comforting arm around her and pressed her to his chest as if he were her bulwark against the troubles surrounding her. How lovely that feeling had been – until she'd come to her senses and

remembered that clinging to a gentleman wasn't the sort of thing a well-brought-up young lady should do.

It was strange, too, that she had been unable to control her emotions in his presence. Something with which she never normally had a problem. It had been nice to be curled up against him, breathing in his smell of fresh linen, citrus, and... maleness. For the second time in her life – the first time had been when he'd enveloped her in his arms when escaping the brothel – she'd felt safe. How wonderful it would be to feel like that all the time, to have someone who cared.

She risked a glance at her companion, whose whole attention at that moment was concentrated on guiding his horses through the arched entrance of Pendennis Castle. His stern features could be quite intimidating, especially when one was under the full force of one of his glares... and that glare had been turned on her more than once. But she had to admit, when Mr Cullen wasn't glowering, his dark eyes held a sparkle and his mouth could turn into a most delicious smile. How wonderful to be the subject on whom that smile was bestowed. Sophia allowed herself a moment to ponder that delightful prospect, then swiftly dismissed it from her mind. She could never hope to attract his esteem. She was a nobody: a paid companion with a dubious past, parentage unknown, and a scandalous connection with a notorious bawd. Any interest Mr Cullen had in her was purely down to his gentlemanlike wish to help a lady in distress.

The noise of soldiers drilling on the parade ground drew her attention.

'Those are the Miners' Artillery Militia,' said Mr Cullen. 'Governor Melvill is keen that they are prepared as well as any soldier in the Peninsular army in case Bonaparte decides to invade.'

'Goodness me. I suppose I had quite forgotten that being on the coast means we are vulnerable. Living in the country, it all seemed so far away. Do you truly believe he might yet invade?' She hadn't really given it a thought until now, embroiled as she was in her own problems.

Mr Cullen's face turned grim. 'Anything is possible, Miss Turner. Although he does seem to be turning his attentions elsewhere at the moment.' He coughed. 'Or so I understand from newspaper reports. But we must remain vigilant here on the coast.' While his tone was reassuring, she appreciated that he did not treat her like a child and tell her not to worry.

'Mr Cullen, what brings you here, sir?' a stentorian voice called out.

Sophia watched as a uniformed gentleman strode towards them from the direction of the barracks. Mr Cullen jumped down from the curricule and waved a greeting.

'Governor, good to see you. Do you have any objection if I show this young lady the good works you and your men are undertaking to protect us from invasion?'

The officer turned to look at Sophia. Sophia felt herself being scrutinised, but

not in an uncomfortable way.

‘Not at all. Please introduce me to your companion, Mr Cullen.’ The officer’s eyes crinkled in a welcoming smile. Sophia, with assistance from Mr Cullen, alighted from the curricule and introductions were made. As Governor Melvill bowed to her, Sophia observed that he had the look of someone not in the best of health. His face, though tanned, was lined, and deep shadows lay under his eyes.

‘Forgive me for not taking you by the hand, Miss Turner,’ said Governor Melvill, indicating his hand with his eyes. ‘As you can see, my left arm is quite useless, and my right is not much better. I cannot raise it very far, but at least my fingers still work, and I am able to write, thank the good Lord.’ Sophia had noticed the sling tying up the governor’s left arm and the awkward way his right arm hung at his side.

‘My dear sir, pray do not worry.’ She did not like to inquire further into how he’d acquired his injuries.

Governor Melvill bowed his head in acknowledgement and addressed them both.

‘As it happens, I have two other visitors today who have also requested a tour of our station. I propose that I take you round together. That is, if you do not mind?’ He gave an appreciative glance towards their transport. ‘And I’ll get one of the men to look after your horses. What fine animals.’

After assuring the governor that they did not mind in the least, Phil and Sophia were soon led over to the sergeants’ mess.

The governor halted outside the door. ‘They should be ready to join us shortly. Lieutenant Ashdown was hoping to pay his respects to Sergeant Miller, who served under him before he lost his leg in action against the French. I thought it most kind of the lieutenant to remember an old shipmate.’

Sophia smiled in agreement. ‘Indeed, sir. One hears so many stories of soldiers and sailors being turned off when they are wounded. After they have given such brave service, it does not seem just. But how is it that a gentleman unfit for naval service is now employed here?’

Melvill turned his full attention to her, his eyes twinkling with pride. ‘This whole company of volunteers is made up of those invalided out of regular service. They still wish to defend their country. We have, of course, a militia of able-bodied men too.’ His head swivelled back to the doorway of the mess. ‘Ah, gentlemen, just in time.’

Sophia looked shyly at the gentlemen he addressed. One was a young man with sandy hair, a fresh, freckled complexion, and friendly green eyes. At a guess, he was perhaps a little older than her. The second gentleman was somewhat older. He had a lean, weather-beaten face, and he assessed her with grey eyes, making her feel almost as if she were wearing no clothes. Both wore naval uniforms denoting their status: navy-blue frock coats with white-trimmed lapels, white

waistcoats, white wool knee breeches, and smart cocked hats, which they both doffed. Sophia quickly cast her own eyes down, but not before noticing that Mr Cullen's jaw had tensed and his eyes had narrowed in a glare.

'Good day, Lieutenants.' Mr Cullen's voice was clipped and not at all friendly.

'Good day to you, Cullen.' It was the older one who answered. 'Aren't you going to introduce us to your fair companion?'

Sophia felt the blood rising in her cheeks. She hated being made to feel like an object. It was an uncomfortable reminder of her time in Mrs Newbody's establishment.

'Miss Turner, may I present to you Lieutenants Ashdown and Jenson. They are recently come ashore. Lieutenants, this is Miss Turner, Admiral Pridham and his wife's very dear friend.'

Sophia sent a puzzled glance at Mr Cullen. Why had he not told them she was Mrs Pridham's companion?

'Well, Miss Turner, you've brightened my day considerably.' Lieutenant Ashdown, a wolfish gleam in his eye, offered her his arm. 'I insist you allow me to escort you round the fortress. I can explain things to you – things that a non-naval gentleman like Mr Cullen cannot do.' He shot a quick glance at Mr Cullen. 'No offence, Mr Cullen.'

'None taken.' Mr Cullen's words came through gritted teeth, and Sophia wondered at the animosity between them. Lieutenant Ashdown's forward manner sent shivers of unease down her own spine, but surely something like that would not bother Mr Cullen?

'Yes, well. Let's make a start.' Governor Melvill, with a swift disapproving look at Lieutenant Ashdown, guided them towards the large, ancient gun tower.

The next hour was a decidedly uncomfortable one for Sophia. Somehow, the way that Lieutenant Ashdown spoke to her made her feel as if each word he uttered held a secret meaning, or was it just her imagination? Try as he might to delay her while the others progressed through the tower and the large batteries recently installed on the cliff top, she ensured that she kept up with the main party. It wasn't her imagination that Mr Cullen, too, seemed preoccupied in ensuring he remained close by. Whenever a corner was turned or a new room entered, he lingered in sight until she and the lieutenant caught up.

'Taking your duty as chaperone rather serious, ain't you, Cullen? Miss Turner won't come to any harm with me, I can assure you.' Ashdown's drawled words indicated he'd noticed Mr Cullen's efforts to protect her.

'Nonsense, Ashdown. Don't know what you mean.' Mr Cullen laughed, not entirely convincingly. 'I'm concerned that Miss Turner is a little fatigued. She has been unwell, you know, and I promised Mrs Pridham that I would make sure she doesn't overexert herself.' He took hold of Sophia's free arm, causing her breath to catch in her throat. 'You appear tired, Miss Turner. You look rather wan.'

Sophia was grateful for the escape he offered. He seemed to excel at helping her escape. ‘Why yes, I am feeling rather fatigued, Mr Cullen. I should be grateful if we could return home.’

Mr Cullen smiled at the lieutenant. ‘I’ll take over from here then, Ashdown. We’ll just make our apologies to the governor and be on our way.’ He bent his elbow for Sophia to take. ‘Enjoy the rest of your tour, Lieutenant.’

‘I’ll be sure to call on you, Miss Turner. I can’t allow our acquaintance to be so short-lived. I have so much enjoyed talking to you.’ There was no mistaking the look of interest in Ashdown’s eye, a look that sent a shiver of apprehension through her. She bobbed a swift curtsy and turned away, glad to be rid of her unwanted escort. Anchored again to Mr Cullen, she felt safe.

After making their excuses to Governor Melvill – who showed a keen concern for Sophia’s welfare, even going so far as to entreat her to pay a visit to his wife for a restorative cup of tea, which she graciously refused – they eventually departed.

‘I do not know what it is, but I cannot warm to Lieutenant Ashdown.’ Sophia decided to be open about her opinion of the lieutenant in the hope that Mr Cullen would tell her something of the animosity that seemed to exist between them.

He grunted. ‘Hmm. Can’t say I’ve taken to him either, although I only made his acquaintance a few days ago.’

She looked at him in surprise. ‘Oh, I thought...’

‘You thought what, Miss Turner?’ He was looking at her in a way that sent more shivers down her spine. Quite pleasant shivers.

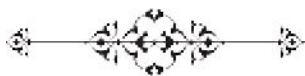
‘I thought perhaps he’d upset you previously. I sensed your dislike of the man as soon as he was introduced.’

‘Yes... well.’ Mr Cullen turned his attention back to his horses. ‘You are correct. I do not like him. He was in the company of Mrs Newbody. Both the lieutenants were. I cannot but feel that any gentleman who keeps that sort of acquaintance is not fit company for a genteel young lady like yourself.’

Sophia didn’t answer. She had frozen at the mention of Mrs Newbody. A hand was gently placed on her arm.

‘Do not worry, Miss Turner. I have given my pledge that your secret is safe with me. Furthermore, I will do my utmost to ensure that Mrs Newbody does you no harm. I will see that she and the gentlemen who attend her do not come near you. Trust me on that.’ There was an intense expression on his face as he turned towards her. No-one had ever looked at her like that before. It was quite unsettling and... rather wonderful.

Chapter 8



PHIL MADE THE final adjustments to his pristine cravat and allowed Curnow to help him on with his dark-blue jacket of superfine Bath cloth, the gilt buttons of which glittered in the flickering candlelight. His white Marcella waistcoat was new on that day and almost matched the white of his kerseymere breeches. White stockings completed his ensemble. He looked down at his shiny buckled shoes; Curnow had made a fine job of bringing a shine to their black surface. He still wasn't quite accustomed to someone helping him to dress, but Curnow was proving to be an able and amiable assistant.

'Don't wait up for me, Curnow. I expect I'll be quite late getting back.' Phil knew that after the social niceties of dinner at the Pridhams', he and the admiral would need some time in private to discuss the latest information about the suspected spy ring. There was also the question of Sophia Turner. Phil's mouth twisted. When they'd parted that afternoon, he'd been unable to convince her that the Pridhams wouldn't dismiss her because of her past association with Ruth Newbody. He prayed his instincts about Mrs Pridham were right. He desperately needed to set matters right for Sophia Turner – a need that he couldn't quite explain but which he acknowledged wasn't just about assuaging his long-held guilt about Mary Weston. Guilt had prompted his initial rescue, but now something else was spurring him on, an emotional response to Sophia's wretched situation and the dire threat posed by the wickedest female he'd ever encountered.

His valet's voice interrupted his thoughts. 'Are you sure, sir?' Curnow was giving him a strange look.

Phil wiped the frown from his face and smiled back reassuringly. 'Indeed I am. You might as well take the evening off, and I'll see you in the morning. Bright and early, mind.'

Curnow's face broke into a smile. 'Thank you, sir. Bright and early it will be.'

It wasn't far from Phil's estate to the admiral's comfortable home, a distance of less than four miles. Sitting in the back of the rocking carriage, Phil pondered Sophia Turner's predicament. It had shaken him to the core to see her so upset; he'd rather formed the opinion that she wasn't one who normally gave way to revealing her emotions. She'd shown no sign of being a fragile flower in London – just the opposite, in fact. Although she'd initially irritated him with her strong views and unwillingness to cede to what he believed was his superior masculine know-how, and she'd infuriated him when she'd run off, he had to admit to a

growing admiration. She was definitely out of the common way. And now that they'd crossed paths again, he was seeing a different, vulnerable side to her in addition to that spark of independence and courage. If truth be known, he found her a confusing and beguiling mix of silk and steel. If he wasn't careful... He groaned. Mustn't let his thoughts go down that road.

He wasn't going to fall in love. If ever he contemplated marriage, it would only be after a thorough and careful examination of his prospective wife's character, for he was not going to repeat the mistake of his parents. The admiral and Mrs Pridham were a prime example of a couple who'd each met their perfect match. There was sure to be hope for him. But not yet. He needed to keep his wits about him while this spy business was going on. He couldn't afford to be distracted by forming an attachment to a young lady who, on the surface, was not his type at all.

He settled back into the squabs and crossed one elegant leg over the other, being careful not to crease his evening breeches. What would she be wearing tonight? She'd damn near taken his breath away that afternoon when she'd stepped daintily down the stairs wearing a very becoming outfit and a matching hat perched saucily on her gleaming chestnut hair. He smiled to himself. Perhaps he would indulge in a mild flirtation – Mrs Pridham seemed to be keen that he show an interest. She had ideas of encouraging a good match for Sophia. He only hoped her fondness for the girl would withstand the revelations that were about to be made about her past. If they didn't, he would have to exert himself to ensure Sophia came to no harm – and how that could be accomplished he had no idea.



Sophia arranged the soft *cashemire* shawl round her shoulders and gave a final approving glance at her appearance in the mirror. Emmaline had insisted she wear the pink crêpe Albanian robe with buttons from the hem up to the modest square neckline. It was long-sleeved, and the cuffs of these were embellished with a Vandyke border, as was the neckline. For modesty, she wore it over a slip of white satin, and on her feet she wore white satin slippers. She'd never before had such fine clothes, having had no occasion, or indeed money, for them. Mrs Archer had never permitted her to attend any of the local assemblies, insisting that all such events led only to sin. Which only made it even stranger that she'd done nothing to prevent Sophia going off to London when she must have known of Ruth Newbody's intentions.

Sophia sighed. She'd better make the most of this evening; it might be her last in respectable company. Mr Cullen had been most insistent that Admiral and Mrs Pridham should be informed of her disastrous connection with Mrs Newbody, or whatever she was calling herself these days. A shiver ran down her spine. The memory of that woman looming over her in the inn still had the power to send

her insides squirming. Sophia pulled her spine straight and patted her hair into place. She wasn't going to let Mrs Newbody spoil what might be her only social outing.

The sound of carriages coming up the drive reminded her that she would be seeing Mr Cullen again that evening. She smiled and felt a tingling excitement. He had promised her that he would not let her come to harm – and for all his overbearing ways, he did inspire her trust. It was not all bluster with him. He'd been the perfect gentleman that afternoon when she'd been expecting him to name the terrible price for his silence. He'd also thwarted that awful Lieutenant Ashdown's attempts to do whatever it was he'd had on his mind – nothing respectable, she was certain.

Sophia flushed with guilt at the memory of how badly she'd used Mr Cullen when he'd only been trying to help. With hindsight, leaving his house so peremptorily had been wrong. She had upset not only him but also his motherly housekeeper, who'd looked after her so well. No wonder his first reaction on seeing her again had been anger. How ungrateful she must have seemed, and how she had misjudged him. Would that she could make amends.

But now things were in a perfect coil, with Mrs Newbody threatening to ruin her life again. Her instinct had been to run, but now she was trusting Mr Cullen and allowing him to protect her. She prayed he was correct about how Emmaline would react to the news of her involvement with a notorious bawd. But now was not the time to fret. It would not do to spoil Emmaline's dinner party by being distracted by anxiety.

Tonight she would carry on as normal. She might almost enjoy herself. She would even pretend that Mr Cullen's attentions to her were motivated by affection and not by his sense of honour at keeping his promise. He was an adventurer, a man who'd acted impulsively and who was now paying the price until she was safely out of the way. A rueful smile curled on her lips. It might be nice if he did have feelings for her, but that would never happen, and besides, not only was he too far above her touch, he was the sort of man who would want a wife who would obey him without question. She rolled her eyes. Obeying without question was something she was never likely to do. Picking up her reticule from the bed, she swirled out of the room to attend Mrs Pridham.



Mrs Pridham beamed at Sophia as she waved off Captain Manson and his wife, who were the last of the Falmouth guests to leave.

‘I think that went off rather well, don't you? Although I was a little concerned that the turbot was not quite as it should be. I thought it a trifle dry, but hopefully the lobster sauce covered any deficiencies. What did you think, my dear?’

Sophia was reaching up to adjust the shawl over Mrs Pridham's shoulders.

‘There, it’s getting a bit chilly.’ She stepped back. ‘I thought it was all perfect. I certainly heard no-one complain about the turbot, and in fact I overheard Captain Manson’s wife saying she was going to send to you for the receipt for the oyster sauce.’ Sophia giggled. ‘I know I shouldn’t criticise, but I did notice she ladled quite a lot of it onto her plate.’

Emmaline’s face beamed. ‘Yes, it was nice, wasn’t it? I came across it when the admiral and I were in Naples. The Hamiltons were most gracious hosts, and Lady Hamilton insisted on giving me the receipt when I complimented her on her chef’s skills.’ Emmaline smiled mischievously at Sophia as she took her arm. ‘Just think, Sophia, you and my guests have eaten the same fare as the highest in the land. Isn’t that a fine thing! Now, let us go to the library and discover what is keeping Mr Cullen and my husband.’

Sophia’s enjoyment of the evening evaporated. This was likely to be his chosen time for disclosing everything to the Pridhams. Her legs turned leaden as she obediently accompanied a still-chattering Emmaline to the library, to where the admiral and Mr Cullen had repaired once the other guests had departed.

Without knocking, Emmaline opened the door and pulled Sophia in with her. The two men were bent over a table, engrossed in examining papers laid out there.

‘What’s this, Admiral? Working again?’ said Emmaline, the smile on her face softening her reprimand. ‘Mr Cullen, please don’t let my husband bully you into dealing with business into the early hours.’

Sophia’s apprehension grew as Mr Cullen straightened up and shot her a piercing look.

‘Ma’am, don’t worry. Your husband and I needed to go over a few matters, and it was most important that we do it this evening.’

The admiral grunted his approval. ‘Well said, sir. There, Emmaline. I do not bully.’

Emmaline shrugged. ‘Very well, sirs, we will leave you alone.’ She turned to depart the room, and Sophia was just about to breathe a sigh of relief when Mr Cullen’s words brought her to a standstill.

‘Please don’t go, Mrs Pridham... and you too, Miss Turner. With your permission, Miss Turner, I think we need to disclose some matters to Admiral Pridham and his wife.’

Beneath her own haze of shock, Sophia heard Emmaline’s surprised gasp and registered the concerned expression on the admiral’s face.

‘What’s that, my boy? Something about little Sophia here? Whatever do you mean?’

Ignoring the admiral’s glare, Mr Cullen moved towards her, holding out his hand. Sophia remained where she was until she became conscious of Emmaline’s hand gripping her arm.

‘Come along, Sophia. I’m sure nothing you disclose could be that distressing. Hannah Simpson gave you the highest character, and I trust her implicitly. She’s one of my oldest friends.’ Emmaline’s reassuring words were not enough to dispel the coil of fear in Sophia’s stomach. Once Emmaline knew the truth, she was bound to be dismissed.

Mr Cullen addressed Mrs Pridham, but it was Sophia upon whom his concerned gaze was fixed. ‘Your friend is correct, Mrs Pridham. There is nothing in Miss Turner’s past for which she should be ashamed.’ His words echoed in Sophia’s head. Did he truly believe she was blameless? She had, after all, treated him shabbily by running off and leaving no word of her real identity or direction.

‘So, you have a previous acquaintance with Sophia, is that right, Mr Cullen?’ Emmaline’s words jolted Sophia out of her frozen state. Would the admiral and his wife think there had been some improper behaviour between them? She couldn’t leave Mr Cullen to explain everything on her behalf. At last she found her voice.

‘Oh, Emmaline... Admiral. I have met Mr Cullen before, it is true. He rendered me the most valuable assistance. In... in fact, I would probably not be here today if it were not for his help.’ Her eyes caught Emmaline’s flicker of surprise, while the admiral, his face impassive, moved towards the decanter of brandy.

‘I think a drink is called for, don’t you, Emmy, my dear?’ he said gruffly. ‘You’ve gone quite pale. Sophia, one for you too, m’dear?’ He was still calling her with the endearment she’d come to love hearing. Maybe all was not lost.

With the glass of brandy clutched in her hand, Sophia told the history of her acquaintance with Mrs Newbody. When she came to the part of her narrative about planning her escape, Mr Cullen took over, describing how they’d absconded and explaining that their own parting had been abrupt but amicable. She bit her lip at his lie, grateful that he wasn’t going to add to her deep shame by disclosing the clandestine nature of her departure from his home, but also wondering at his purpose in doing so.

‘What were you doing in that awful woman’s establishment, Mr Cullen?’ With one foot on the fender, grim expression, and barked words, the admiral could have been conducting a court martial. ‘I thought Mrs Newbody’s true character was not revealed to you until fairly recently.’ His glare intensified. ‘Was it a social visit?’

Mr Cullen’s finger crept up to his neck and tugged at his neckcloth. ‘No, sir, it was not.’ He cleared his throat. ‘I was assisting a friend in an investigation, and we were meeting an informer there. I regret that I am unable to give you any more details.’ He looked the admiral straight in the eye. ‘I can only add that it was a lucky chance that I saw Miss Turner there, prompting me to offer my assistance. She looked quite desperate and not at all happy to be there.’

Sophia nodded vigorously, desperate for the Pridhams to believe him.

‘It’s true, Admiral. I’d never seen Mr Cullen before. I only glimpsed him as he and his companion were being escorted to one of the rooms at the back where a friend of Mrs Newbody’s was staying.’

Admiral Pridham grunted. His face still held a stern expression.

Emmaline had made no remarks during the course of Sophia’s explanation, something most unusual for a lady who was normally quite vocal. Even more troubling to Sophia was the dangerous glint in Emmaline’s eyes.

‘Mr Cullen?’ Emmaline’s voice was silky.

‘Yes, Mrs Pridham?’ To his credit, Mr Cullen’s voice was steady.

‘Am I correct in understanding that our little Sophia was in your house overnight?’ Sophia’s insides quaked. The reason for the glint became obvious. What was Emmaline implying? Surely it was her stay in Mrs Newbody’s house that was more damning?

Sophia swivelled her head to look at Mr Cullen, who now looked as if he were sucking a lemon. ‘Yes, Miss Turner remained overnight, but my housekeeper, Mrs Dobson, saw to her needs, and I can assure you that there was no impropriety.’

‘That’s beside the point, Mr Cullen.’ Sophia’s heart sank. Emmaline was not going to abandon her attack. ‘I can understand that Miss Turner’s abduction was completely against her will and leaves her totally blameless, but’ – she paused – ‘you can hardly say the same for her sojourn in your house, can you?’

Mr Cullen’s hands clenched at his sides. Sophia’s own cheeks burned with shame. Where did Emmaline think this line of questioning was leading?

‘What are you implying, Mrs Pridham? I can assure you that no impropriety took place.’ Mr Cullen’s words came out from between gritted teeth.

Sophia must have moaned aloud, for she felt Emmaline’s hand on her arm.

‘Shh, Sophia. Don’t worry, I have your interest at heart.’ Emmaline’s words, muttered under her breath, gave Sophia little comfort. In a louder voice, Emmaline addressed her husband. ‘Admiral, my dear, don’t you think that your friend Mr Cullen is under an obligation to Sophia to ensure her reputation is not compromised?’

‘What’s that, my dear?’ The admiral blinked, then understanding appeared in his eyes. ‘Ah... yes. Quite right.’ He turned to Mr Cullen. ‘Mrs Pridham has the right of it, my boy. You can’t let Miss Turner suffer the slings and arrows of society’s opinion. Once word of this gets out...’

‘But it won’t get out.’ Mr Cullen’s face was almost puce, and a nerve twitched in his cheek. Sophia thought she’d seen him annoyed before, but that was nothing compared to his current state. And all because her friends were pressuring him to... what? Were they implying he should marry her to save her good name? The thought galvanised her, and she leapt up off the sofa.

‘No, no. Admiral... Emmaline, there is no need for this.’ Her voice echoed loudly in the suddenly silent room. ‘Mr Cullen is under no obligation to me

whatsoever. I have no desire to marry him, and I'm quite sure his feelings match mine in the matter. I am more concerned if anyone should discover my connection with Mrs Newbody.'

Her eyes turned to Mr Cullen and took in the look of surprise on his face. Had he expected her to jump at the chance of marriage to him? She'd confounded his expectations yet again, it seemed. Something that gave her scant satisfaction.

The admiral set his glass down. 'Sophia, please sit down and let me deal with this matter. I feel I should act in the place of the father you never had. You've become very dear to me and Mrs Pridham, and we won't see you ruined. Now, Phil here tells me that Mrs Newbody and Mrs Harris are one and the same...'

'What?' It was Emmaline's turn to be surprised.

'That's right, m'dear,' continued the admiral. 'Mrs Newbody is living under an assumed name. As I told you the other day, I've been ordered to keep her under observation. She is involved in all sorts of mischief. Running a house of ill repute is the least of it.'

'Is that why...?' Emmaline's worried eyes shot to Sophia's face, and Sophia nodded, knowing to what her friend referred. 'No wonder. That awful woman. Her eyes were positively gloating with pleasure when she saw you. I couldn't understand it.' Emmaline frowned. 'But why does she want you, Sophia? That I can't understand.'

Sophia twisted the fringe of her shawl and shook her head. 'I have no idea, Emmaline, believe me. She tricked me into going to London with her. When she called on Mrs Archer, the lady who had care of me, I formed the impression that there was no love lost between them. I'd heard their raised voices before I was called to the drawing room, but everything was settled by the time I made my entrance.' Sophia's mouth twisted as she recalled Mrs Archer's stony silence as Mrs Newbody had expounded on the great opportunity that was coming her way. Mrs Archer's lack of comment should have warned her that all was not as it seemed. Sophia's lip curled in a contemptuous smile – contempt at herself. 'If only I'd ignored her lures. But I was naive and excited to be broadening my horizons, and Mrs Archer did not offer any objections.'

'There, there, my dear.' Emmaline patted her arm. 'You must not blame yourself. With no-one to guide them, any young gel would have done the same in your circumstances.' Emmaline shook her head. 'Though I do wonder about this Mrs Archer.'

Mr Cullen interrupted. 'With your permission, Admiral and Mrs Pridham, I think Miss Turner has endured enough for this evening. I think we should leave this until tomorrow. May I call upon you first thing in the morning?'

The admiral shot a glance at his wife, who nodded her acquiescence, before he answered.

'I agree. This is something to be discussed with clear heads. Ladies, get

yourselves off to bed.’ He swivelled to Mr Cullen. ‘Get yourself off too, lad. I’ll expect you here at first light. We can breakfast together.’ It was clear to all that the admiral was issuing orders, not requests.

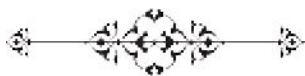
A grim-faced Mr Cullen took his leave. Sophia felt almost sorry for him. She couldn’t believe the way Emmaline had tried to trap him into making her an offer. There was no need for that at all. She supposed that her friend and employer thought she was doing her a good turn. How wrong she was, although marriage to Mr Cullen was not an unappealing proposition. He was intelligent and educated, and he had a way of looking at her that made her feel warm inside. Initially, she’d thought him domineering and quick-tempered, but those traits, she was beginning to understand, were because he’d never really had to take account of another’s needs or feelings. She’d upset him with her own impulsive behaviour – a bachelor with no cares other than his own. No, her major concern about marrying Mr Cullen was the fact that deeper feelings were not involved. She’d always wanted a marriage like the one the Pridhams enjoyed, with mutual respect and love. Something that was not very likely now.

Dejectedly, she traipsed up the stairs behind Emmaline. Emmaline turned to her at the open door to her bedchamber.

‘Now you get yourself off to sleep. I’ll get Anna to bring you some hot milk once she’s seen to my chocolate. That should help.’ She cupped Sophia’s face in her hands. ‘Don’t worry, Sophia. Nothing I’ve learned tonight will induce me to turn you off. Rather the opposite, my dear. We must discover what it is that this Mrs Newbody, or Harris, or whoever, wants with you. And if she is involved in something underhand, as my husband says, we must bring her activities to a halt.’ The older woman kissed her lightly on the forehead. ‘And don’t worry about Mr Cullen. He’ll come up to scratch, mark my words.’

Before Sophia could utter a response to this outrageous remark, Emmaline entered her bedchamber, closing the door firmly behind her.

Chapter 9



PHIL DUG HIS HEELS into the stirrups and urged his mount to go faster. The salt wind whipped at his hair and face, but he didn't care about the wildness of the weather, wanting only to clear his head. It had been after one in the morning when he'd arrived home, and what a state he'd been in. Not in his cups, certainly, but by three he was decidedly bosky. Seething at how Mrs Pridham had tried to manipulate him – and he'd considered her a sensible woman! Good Lord, he would decide when he would marry, and he would not be bounced into parson's mousetrap by some interfering female, no matter how much he esteemed her husband. His superiors had entrusted him with the task of catching Ruth Newbody and preventing her absconding to France with the cache of gold. He could not afford to be distracted by talk of marriage.

Luckily, once home, Stephens had been on hand to fetch the requested bottle of port. A further hour of drinking and thinking hadn't improved his mood. Now, as dawn broke, Phil's headache raged. He drew his horse into a trot and surveyed his surroundings, surprised he'd reached the headland overlooking Penance Point. Coming to a halt to allow the stallion to nibble on the grass, he stood up in the saddle and gazed out to sea. The waves below sparkled in the early morning sun, mocking his sour mood. It all looked set fair for a fine day to come.

Phil scowled. A fair day for everyone but him. He really needed to sort out his thoughts about Miss Sophia Turner. From his first impulsive action of aiding her to escape, she had lingered in his mind, despite alternately attracting and annoying him. He'd sworn to protect her – an oath he intended to keep. But now, thanks to the admiral's wife, she was becoming a veritable thorn in his side. He blinked in the sunlight, remembering the previous night. She hadn't seemed too overjoyed at the heavy hint that he should offer for her. Now that had surprised him. He'd always assumed he was something of a catch – the females of his recent acquaintance certainly treated him as such. It had somewhat dented his pride to see Sophia's mouth turn down and her eyes register dismay at Mrs Pridham's words. Was he really that obnoxious that a female of very limited expectations should shun the idea of marriage to him? Despite his antipathy to marriage, his disappointment at her reluctance was beyond rational explanation.

He examined his behaviour when in her company. Had there been something there that had given her a dislike of him? Why, he'd rescued her from that awful place, he'd given her shelter, and more recently he'd vowed to keep her safe from Mrs Newbody. Shouldn't she be grateful? He shook his head. There must be

something.

He examined each scene again, going over each for clues to her attitude. Perhaps he had been a bit brusque with her at first, but he'd needed to get her out of Mrs Newbody's establishment quickly. The morning after that, they'd nearly argued when he'd told her to leave everything to him. There'd been a spark of anger in her eyes that he'd ignored, dismissing it completely when she suddenly acquiesced to his instructions and his sarcasm.

He tensed, causing his horse to shy and nearly unseat him. The way he'd spoken to her, treating her like a fool when all the evidence pointed to the fact that she was no fool at all but an intelligent and appealing young woman. Why, she'd been about to escape on her own. She'd made her way to the staging inn and got herself safely back to Oxfordshire, eluding his man. And she'd impressed both of the Pridhams with her character so much so that they were keen to see her comfortably settled. No, Sophia Turner was no fool.

Guilt tweaked at his conscience. He'd been unconscionably rude and arrogant. He remembered how he'd accused her of thinking the worst of him and inwardly cringed. That was no way for a gentleman to behave towards a lady. She'd dented his pride with what he now saw as her understandable reluctance to trust him. His blasted pride!

He checked his pocket watch and frowned. Admiral Pridham would be waiting for him. He pulled on the reins and set off, pondering how he could change Miss Turner's opinion of him without actually making an offer of marriage. He didn't question too closely his reasons for feeling the need to do so.



Sophia had barely slept, despite the warmed milk the maid had brought on Emmaline's instruction. As dawn broke, she sat up in bed, abandoning the struggle to find some peace. What was she going to do? She'd thought her only problem was Mrs Newbody, and although she was profoundly relieved that Emmaline and her husband were not going to dismiss her, she couldn't in all conscience go along with Emmaline's outrageous plan of forcing Mr Cullen to offer for her. No, it would never do, and for so many reasons.

For a start, he didn't love her. He might care enough to want to protect her, but certainly not enough to marry her, even when pressed. Guilt coiled her insides at how she'd got him wrong. He hadn't intended to blackmail her at all, rather the opposite. He'd come to warn her about Ruth Newbody's presence in Falmouth, something she'd already discovered herself. Her opinion of him had further improved during their afternoon drive. He'd behaved like a true gentleman, even rescuing her from the unwelcome attentions of Lieutenant Ashdown. Sophia frowned. How could she have so misunderstood him? Was it down to the fact that she had no real understanding of men? The only gentlemen of her acquaintance

were Reverend Simpson and Admiral Pridham. Good examples both, but as different as could be from the dangerously attractive Mr Cullen. She caught her breath. Yes, she was attracted to him. But it was an attraction she couldn't afford to indulge.

She slumped back down on the bed, painfully aware of her own shortcomings in her treatment of him. He'd shown her nothing but kindness, and she'd repaid him with suspicion and mistrust. It was no wonder he seemed angry at times. She, too, would take offence if someone expressed concerns about her character. Oh dear! How could she redeem herself in his eyes? She didn't want to trap him into marriage – that was the last thing she wished for. No, all she desired was for him to regard her as worthy of his efforts to help. But how that could be achieved, she had no idea.

But first things first. She flung off the covers and swung her legs purposefully out of bed, working out her plan of action. Her main task this morning should be deflecting the Pridhams' attempts to coerce Mr Cullen into offering marriage, while at the same time letting him know that it was not disdain for his character that motivated her refusal of his offer. It was going to be a delicate balancing act. She glanced at the blue sky through the window, then checked the clock. Perhaps there would be time for a quick stroll outside to clear her head before she faced everyone at breakfast. It was unlikely she would encounter anyone at this early hour.

Fifteen minutes later, wrapped up in a warm shawl to keep out the brisk morning air, Sophia stepped outside and headed across the lawn to the woodland bordering the property. She knew the woodland paths a little, having walked them once with Emmaline, who'd told her that a lane leading towards the coast lay on the other side of the trees. Curious to discover how far she needed to walk before she spotted the sea, Sophia made up her mind to find out.

It took only a few moments before she came out of the woods. The lane, bordered by tall hedgerows, stretched out to right and left, one way leading inland, the other to the sea. She sniffed the air. It had a salty tang. She smiled to herself. If she hurried, she could view the sea and be back before anyone missed her. The sight of it had excited her: endless water stretching as far as the eye could see. Her sense of adventure – temporarily curbed by her unfortunate experience with Mrs Newbody – reared again in her breast, and she set off with rapid, determined steps.

There was a rustling in the hedgerow ahead, but focussed on her goal and intent on not letting anything distract her, Sophia ignored it. By the time she knew something was wrong, strong arms had grasped her and swung her off her feet. A gloved palm was pressed against her mouth to stop her from crying out.

There were at least two of them, fellows who didn't speak but seemed to know what they were about. She struggled, digging her heels into the dry, dusty earth,

but it was no good. Something was tied round her mouth to stop her from screaming. A hessian sack was pulled over her head, and despite her kicking out, a cord was wound round her ankles, tying her feet together. Sick with fear at what was going to happen, Sophia felt herself lifted and launched into space before she landed with a thump on what she guessed was the floor of a carriage. The door banged shut, and her body was thrown against the seat as the vehicle rolled into motion. Despite a painful shoulder – injured when it had made contact with the floor of the carriage – she managed to get herself upright. But not for long. The vehicle was now moving at a spanking pace, and she was being flung about from side to side. Whoever had taken her was in a hurry.

Must stay calm, she told herself, fighting her rising panic. How long had she got until the coach reached its destination? At last, getting her breathing under control, she squirmed and turned until she became wedged between the two seats, her knees tucked under her chin. Now that she was no longer being hurled this way and that, the dizziness and sickness that had threatened to overwhelm her subsided. With a few more contortions, she was able to shuffle the sack from her head. Whoever had tied her hands had not thought to bind them behind her back. No longer blinded, her eyes darted around the black leather upholstered interior, noting that it didn't look heavily used. *Not a jobbing carriage, then.* Not opulent, but definitely not shabby. Sophia sniffed. There was no scent giving a clue to the owner – no lingering perfume or aroma of cigars. But the identity of her kidnapper would soon be revealed if she didn't manage to get away. Spurred on by that dreadful thought, she set to, frantically trying to loosen her bonds before the destination was reached. Her stomach churned at the thought of who and what might await her there. Why, oh why had she foolishly gone for a walk?



Phil handed his greatcoat of bottle-green superfine and his low-crowned hat to the footman and strode across the hall to the door he'd been directed to. Inside, the admiral and his wife were already seated at the breakfast table. They stopped speaking as he entered, and Admiral Pridham stood up, waving him in.

'Ah, here you are, Phil. Come and sit down.' He sounded friendly enough.

Phil noted wryly that he was now addressed as "Phil" and not "my boy". Looked like the admiral had changed tack.

'I've no idea what's keeping Sophia,' said Mrs Pridham. 'I told her we would be breaking our fast early this morning.' She gestured to a maid who was setting a fresh pot of coffee on the sideboard. 'Tell Miss Sophia to join us directly, Maria.' The maid bobbed a curtsy and scuttled off.

So, Miss Turner wasn't eager to see him again. Was that why she was delaying her entrance? Phil sat down, glad of the reprieve from facing her, and accepted a cup of coffee from the footman.

‘Very grateful to see you’re on time. We must get this business sorted.’ Admiral Pridham helped himself to a thick slice of beef and then offered the dish to Phil.

‘What business are you referring to, Admiral?’ Phil, hungry after his ride and therefore even more on edge, piled two slices of beef onto his plate.

‘Why... Mrs Newbody, of course. I’ve received a message from London. It has been confirmed that we must wait and see what she does before apprehending her. With luck, we’ll also land her associates. She cannot be acting alone.’ The admiral took another mouthful, a thoughtful expression on his face as he chewed.

‘What a devilish woman she must be,’ he said eventually. ‘Fooled everyone into thinking she was dead. I only hope the body they fished out of the Thames and identified as her was not some poor soul killed deliberately.’ He glanced at his wife. ‘I apologise, my dear, for discussing such a distasteful subject at the breakfast table.’

His wife sighed. ‘You know me better than that, Admiral. My first few months at sea cured me of any missish tendencies. Do carry on, gentlemen.’ Mrs Pridham returned to her coddled eggs.

The admiral, in between further mouthfuls of beef, continued. ‘They now have solid evidence that Newbody was blackmailing clients and raising money to send over to France.’

‘I see.’ Phil sipped at his coffee, feeling more relaxed now that his position regarding Miss Turner was not to be the focus of conversation. ‘No doubt that forms the gold shipment we have been hearing about. Is there any further news about that?’

Before the admiral could respond, there came a tap on the door, and the maid who’d left earlier entered looking rather pale. She whispered urgently into Mrs Pridham’s ear. Phil watched above the rim of his cup – it all had an uncomfortably familiar feeling.

‘Admiral, Sophia is not in her room. She is nowhere to be found.’ Mrs Pridham’s words confirmed Phil’s worst fears. What had Miss Turner taken into her head to do now?

‘What?’ The admiral glared at Phil. ‘This is your doing, young man.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Phil set his cup back down, rather harder than he’d intended. Why was he to blame?

‘Your reluctance to rescue Miss Turner’s reputation was all too plain last night, sir. Admit it. The poor child has obviously taken it into her head to run away because of it.’

‘Nonsense!’ Mrs Pridham’s exclamation stopped Phil’s own refutation on his lips. He jerked his head towards her. ‘I don’t believe she has run away,’ she continued. ‘Maria says there are no clothes missing, and all of Sophia’s belongings are still in her room. I suspect she has gone for a walk and has lost her way. She is far too level-headed to do anything rash, and certainly not without taking her

things with her.'

Phil nodded his head, relieved that the evidence pointed to Miss Turner not having absconded. Deep down, he knew the young woman was not addle-pated. The short time he'd spent in her company had revealed that she was quick-witted and intelligent.

'I'll go and find her,' he found himself saying to a now worried-looking Mrs Pridham.

'Wait a moment, Phil. Let me organise a proper search party. No point in haring off willy-nilly.' The admiral stood up and headed for the door, leaving the remains of his beefsteak untouched. Phil followed hard on his heels.

Before many minutes, a search party was got up. Phil admired the efficient way the admiral directed his staff, setting them off in parties of two in different directions to cover all possible pathways across his land. He assumed it was years of naval training and experience that made the admiral such an effective leader.

He and the admiral set off together to search the path to the coast. 'Emmy told me Sophia was fascinated by her first sight of the sea. I shouldn't wonder that this is the way she has gone.' The admiral's face was grim as he strode towards the trees. 'I just hope no harm has come to her.' He sent Phil a worried look. 'And, of course, that woman knows she is living with us.'

An unpleasant shiver went down Phil's spine, remembering both Mrs Newbody's presence in Falmouth and Lieutenant Ashdown's behaviour of the previous day.

They picked their way along the path through the trees until they got sight of the road. The admiral pointed to the right. 'This way. Keep your eyes peeled. When we reach the top of the rise, I'll do a sweep with my spyglass, see if I can spot the lass.'

Phil's eyes scanned the hedgerows and ditches for any sign that Miss Turner had passed that way. The lane itself was dry and dusty, and several times he thought he could discern the footprint of a woman's small boot. Inwardly, he cursed himself for not issuing a warning last night. Miss Turner should have stayed indoors, or at least not ventured off the property, while Mrs Newbody was at large. There was no telling what a woman like that might do to someone who had thwarted her plans.

Phil felt a tug on his sleeve and turned to where the admiral was pointing. 'Over there, do you see?'

Screwing his eyes, Phil focussed on a break in the hedgerow ahead where the ground had been churned up and much of the grass thereabouts flattened. He headed over for a closer inspection, fear gnawing at his insides. As he got nearer, it was clear that a vehicle of some description had recently been there. The imprints of wheels and hooves were all too apparent. His eyes fixed on a patch that showed signs of a struggle – a myriad of boot prints. Crouching down, he saw

the distinct imprint of a lady's dainty boot and knew it had to be Miss Turner's. Who else would be walking a lonely lane at this early hour, and so well shod? A hand clasped his shoulder, and above the buzzing thoughts whirling in his head, he heard the admiral's choked words.

'This is very recent. Someone has taken her.'

He looked up into Pridham's anguished face.

'Don't worry, Admiral. I'll find her.'

Chapter 10



SOPHIA'S HEART RACED. THERE wasn't much time. She'd managed to get the gag off her mouth and was working furiously to loosen the bonds biting into her wrists. She groaned in frustration. It was no good – they were far too tight. She scanned the coach interior for something sharp to work against. Nothing. A moan escaped her lips and hot, angry tears rolled down her cheeks. Why was this happening to her? Hadn't she suffered enough? And all because she'd been so careless as to go for a walk on her own. Who would've guessed that Ruth Newbody would move so swiftly to get her back? Sophia was certain Ruth Newbody was responsible. But why? Revenge for having her plans upset?

Suddenly, the coach lurched to one side, sending her crashing painfully against the door. The rocking and swaying continued. Flung this way and that, it became impossible to sit up and continue working on the knots. Another dreadful thought occurred to her that sent fresh panic coursing through her veins. What if they ended up in a ditch? The way the coach was being driven didn't make that prospect so unlikely. The temptation to abandon her struggle grew stronger. It would be easier to curl up into a limp heap and await her fate. But anger spurred her on. She wasn't going to give up. The worst hadn't happened yet, and until it did, she was not going to surrender without a fight.

Drawing a deep breath, she hauled herself upright and then crashed down again when the coach lurched to a sudden halt. Her head spun towards the door as angry voices reached her ears. The vehicle swayed as the driver or his companion climbed down. Her pulse rate increased, but she felt incapable of action. Frozen in place, she waited for the door to be pulled open. Had she reached the dreaded destination?

Over the horses' whickering and neighs, and the jangle of harness, a gruff voice was heard.

'We'll have to risk the main road, I say. We'll not get much further on this godforsaken track. This heap of junk won't take more of this jolting, and if the axle goes, we'll be in a right fix. Besides, the lass will be too afeared to try anything.'

The answering grumble was too muffled for her to discern.

The first speaker spoke again. 'I'll check, if it will make you happy. Though I tells you, the chit will be in a faint and won't even know.'

Sophia's eyes shot round the gloomy interior to locate the hastily discarded sack. Footsteps were getting nearer, the grumbling getting louder. She fumbled

around, finding it at last lodged under her feet. Wrinkling her nose at the unsavoury smell, she dragged the rough hessian over her head, just as the handle of the coach door creaked, and slumped into an attitude of what she hoped would be taken as unconsciousness. Barely daring to breathe, she lay still, praying that her act would be convincing.

There was a grunt, then the sound of the carriage door slamming shut again. It didn't sound quite right.

'Bloody door!' The door crashed shut a second time. 'Summat wrong with this. Never mind, it'll hold till we gets there. Wot did I say? In a dead faint, she is. Won't cause us any trouble. Turn the horses, and let's be off.' The coach swayed and rolled into motion.

Sophia recommenced breathing, but it was several moments before she dared to move again. It was another struggle to remove the sack. It got caught on a hairpin, and only firm tugging and a degree of pain enabled her to be free of it once more. She sat up and cocked her ears. The pounding of the horses' hooves told her they were moving briskly now. The jolting and swaying had decreased in intensity, both good indicators that they were now on a better maintained route, perhaps even a toll road. A glimmer of hope flickered into life. With luck, there would be other road users, and somehow she would attract attention to her plight.

The blinds over the carriage windows were down, but above the rumbling of the wheels came the screech of gulls... and something else. Hardly believing her ears, Sophia's certainty grew. It was the sound of other vehicles. Quelling her immediate impulse to scream – it might only succeed in alerting her captors – Sophia heaved herself onto the seat and tugged the blind away from the window. She blinked, her eyes dazzled momentarily by the sunlight. Her heart lifted at the sight before her. People were milling about: seamen, army officers, tradesmen, and housewives. Good grief! It looked like Falmouth.

Sophia knew this was her chance. Freedom was almost within her grasp. Her eyes shot to the handle, remembering the villain's cursed complaint. It looked firm enough, but he'd said something was wrong. It was now or never; soon they'd be through the town centre. Gritting her teeth and summoning all her strength, she slammed her fists down. By some miracle, the door flew open. Without thinking twice, Sophia flung herself out, landing with a painful thud on hard cobbles. Winded by the impact, she squeezed her eyes closed and rolled as far as she could from the still-moving vehicle. If only she could avoid the wheels and hooves of the other traffic in the crowded thoroughfare.

Curses and profanities assailed her ears. There were prods and kicks as she tumbled and rolled along the ground. Suddenly she stopped, halted by something solid.

'Ouch!'

'Ahoy there! What's going on, missy?' a gruff male voice asked. She cracked

one eye open. Her view was limited, but by the cluster of worn boots, down-at-heel shoes, and even bare feet, she guessed a crowd was gathering round her.

‘The lass is tied up, can’t you see?’ another voice answered, this one female. ‘Looks like mischief afoot, if you ask me.’

Bruised and dizzy, and dazzled by the light, Sophia squinted up to see a circle of spectators eying her curiously.

‘Help me, please.’ Her voice came out as a croak. ‘That coach over there...’ She pointed, then lowered her hand. It had disappeared from sight. She tried again. ‘I’ve been kidnapped.’

There were gasps and cries of ‘Shame!’

The crowd of onlookers grew, making it impossible for her to see anything of the road between the sea of legs. A young, sandy-haired naval gentleman was lurking nearby. There was a look of anger on his face. Sophia couldn’t be certain, but he looked like one of the officers she’d met at Pendennis Castle the previous day. Their eyes met, and his angry expression was replaced with a smile.

‘Right, lads. You heard the young lady. Let’s catch some villains!’ His shouted words rang out above the general clamour. Spinning on his heels, the officer forced his way back through the crowd, closely followed by several burly-looking companions. Sophia didn’t have time to consider further before she was suddenly hoisted to her feet. She smiled gratefully at the sturdy-looking female who had helped her. By her plain dress, distinctive straw bonnet, and shawl, Sophia guessed she was one of those employed to salt and barrel the landed fish. The woman made short work of the cords tying Sophia’s wrists with a quick flick of the knife at her belt. The woman stood back, arms folded across her chest as if admiring her handiwork.

‘Are you all right now, my lovely?’ she asked.

Sophia nodded. ‘Yes... yes, thank you. But... could you untie my feet, please?’

‘Well, I’ll be!’ Looking shocked, the woman took her knife again and, without further ado, bent down, lifted Sophia’s skirt, and sliced through the cords.

‘I don’t know what the world is coming to,’ the woman muttered. ‘It’ll be those Frenchies, you mark my words,’ she added with a snarl. ‘Coming here and causing mayhem amongst innocent folk because they’re no match for our soldiers in a fair fight. Ain’t that right, girls?’

‘Aye, aye. You be right, Sal,’ several female voices chirped in.

‘I don’t think...’

Sophia’s words were drowned out in the chorus of voices that echoed round the quayside. It was clear that her group of female rescuers were strongly of the opinion that Napoleon himself was behind every ill that occurred in Falmouth and its environs. Sophia abandoned the attempt to make herself heard.

Now free from all encumbrances, she was hustled by her self-appointed protectors to the nearest inn and placed firmly on a bench in the inn’s back

parlour.

The fisherwomen gathered round, and their leader, Sal, prevailed upon the innkeeper to bring Sophia a brandy. Despite her protestations that she didn't need a strong drink, a glass of brandy was placed before her. The focus of everyone's eyes, Sophia felt compelled to take a cautious sip. The strength of it took her by surprise. Coughing and spluttering, much to the amusement of her female onlookers, it was several minutes before she at last decided the time had come for her to exert her authority on the proceedings.

'Do you know how I can send a message to Admiral Pridham, if you please?' Sophia addressed Sal who, by her comments to her companions and her easy command of the innkeeper, had impressed her as being someone who knew how to achieve anything she set her mind to.

'Admiral Pridham, eh? I knows of him,' said Sal. 'Sure. One of my lads will see to that for you, miss.' She nudged a young boy who was hovering close by. 'You heard, Sam. Off you go.' The lad skittered out of the door. Sal turned and gave Sophia a speculative look. 'You the admiral's daughter, then?'

'No. I'm... I'm staying with Admiral and Mrs Pridham at the moment.' Sophia judged it wise to keep quiet about her exact status in the Pridham establishment. Help might not be as forthcoming if it was known that she was merely a companion. Sophia risked another sip from the glass. Once you got used to it, it was quite pleasant, she found.

It wasn't long before she and Sal were chatting on easy terms. The other women crowded round as Sophia asked them about their way of life, answering her questions and astonishing her with their tales of hardship and poverty. Her respect for her rescuers grew. These women might be poor and uneducated, but they were hard-working, raising children alone while their husbands were away at sea for long periods. Some of their husbands never returned.

A commotion at the door of the parlour caught her attention. It was the naval gentleman who'd gone off in pursuit of the carriage. He doffed his bicorne hat and bowed, to appreciative titters from the women. Ignoring them, he addressed Sophia.

'I regret that my men and I were unable to identify your abductors, Miss Turner.'

Sophia smiled back at him. It was indeed the gentleman she'd met at Pendennis Castle, though thank goodness it wasn't that awful Lieutenant Ashdown. This poor chap looked quite flustered, not smooth and self-confident like his companion of yesterday. Perhaps he was embarrassed at not apprehending her abductors.

'Thank you for your efforts in any case, sir. Now, I must endeavour to return home. As you might know, I reside with Admiral and Mrs Pridham. Are you acquainted with the admiral?'

'I am indeed, ma'am. I can arrange for your safe return. Leave it with me.' He

saluted and turned to leave the room, but as he did so, a further commotion caused by even more people arriving forced him back.

‘Jenson, what are you doing here? Ah, good man. I see you have found our little Sophia.’

The admiral’s voice resounded round the parlour, years of barking orders from the quarterdeck having honed it to a level uncomfortably loud for a domestic situation. Then the man himself came into view, pushing his way through the throng. He was closely followed by another familiar figure – a stern-faced Mr Cullen.

Sophia leapt to her feet. For some reason, she felt she ought to apologise, certain that her absence from home would have caused all sorts of anxieties for Emmaline.

‘Oh, Admiral. I’m terribly sorry to have caused such trouble. How is Mrs Pridham? I hope she has not been upset on my account?’

‘Nonsense, my dear. It is you I am concerned about. What happened?’ Admiral Pridham paused as Mr Cullen leaned in and muttered something in his ear. ‘What’s that? Yes, of course.’ The admiral shot a look round the room and addressed Sophia again. ‘Well, you can tell all later.’ There was an audible sigh of disappointment from the bystanders. Undaunted, the admiral continued. ‘I think we need to get you home, my dear.’ Turning to the women, who had started to head dejectedly out of the door, he added, ‘Ladies, I will ask the landlord to see to it that you each receive a tankard of small beer. It is in way of thanks for your assistance this morning.’

At this, the women brightened up immediately. ‘You’re a real gentleman, sir.’ It was Sal who spoke.

‘Here, take this. It was your lad, I believe, who directed us here. We met him just as we entered the town.’ The admiral pressed some coins into Sal’s hand.

Sophia felt a hand on her arm and looked up to see an unsmiling Mr Cullen standing next to her.

‘Come with me. I’ll guide you to the coach while Admiral Pridham sorts matters with the landlord.’

Sophia followed him as he carefully pushed a way through the throng, thanking people as she went. She caught sight of Lieutenant Jenson who was still lingering by the door. The expression of pure venom that he was directing towards Mr Cullen gave her a start. What possible reason did he have for such a look? Was he perhaps jealous that he’d been robbed of the opportunity of escorting her home? She frowned to herself. How immature of him.

Soon, Sophia was in the carriage with the admiral while Mr Cullen rode alongside. Her nerves were still somewhat unsettled, and she was grateful that the admiral didn’t subject her to an interrogation. It was also a relief that Mr Cullen was not travelling in the carriage. The intense look she’d seen in his eyes when

he'd taken her by the arm had sent her insides quivering. She couldn't tell if it was anger or some other emotion that he was making an effort to control. Whatever it was, she didn't feel up to facing him alone until he'd calmed down.

Later, in the drawing room, and after much hugging from a relieved Emmaline and several cups of tea at that lady's insistence, Sophia was at last permitted to explain what had happened.

'Are you sure you didn't see something that might identify your abductors?' It was Mr Cullen speaking.

'No. Not at all, I'm afraid. By the time I'd spotted the carriage in the clearing, it was too late. A hand came around my mouth from behind, and someone pinioned my arms.' A grimace passed over Mr Cullen's face, and Emmaline winced. Sophia carried on. 'I expect they didn't think that I would be able to move, never mind open the carriage door, trussed up as I was. It was sheer luck that there was something wrong with the door catch.'

'You could have been badly hurt, flinging yourself out like that.' Mr Cullen's words had an accusatory tone.

'It was a good thing I did. Goodness knows what might have happened if I'd meekly remained where I was.' Anger bubbled up inside her. Why was he making it sound as if she'd done something irresponsible when in fact she'd engineered her own escape?

'Quite right, Sophia,' said Emmaline, patting her hand. 'I think Mr Cullen is being a bit harsh. I think it a good thing you showed some backbone.'

Mr Cullen reddened and looked away. 'I was only stating that Miss Turner might not have been so lucky if she'd tumbled out and fallen under the wheels of another vehicle.'

Admiral Pridham spoke. 'There, there, Cullen. No need to berate the lass. She is safe home now, and none the worse. Although we must discover who is behind it all.' He paced towards the fireplace and reached for his pipe. In response to his wife's disapproving look, his hand returned to his side. 'Hmm, the question is... Was Sophia deliberately targeted?' He continued. 'Or was it someone who, on an impulse, seeing a pretty girl on her own' – Sophia squirmed guiltily – 'decided to take a chance?'

'I cannot believe it is a coincidence,' said a frowning Mr Cullen. He looked up at the admiral from where he was sitting. 'Surely you do not believe it was chance that someone was waiting. Who else is likely to pass by at that time in the morning? It must be Mrs Newbody.' He stood up, his figure towering over Sophia as he faced her. 'Are you sure you can't remember some detail? Some little thing that might lead us to the culprit?'

She shook her head, uncomfortable with his interrogation. 'No. I've racked my brains. There were no smells, no marks, and nothing inside the carriage to identify the owner. It was good-quality leather upholstery though, that I do recall.

I'm sure there were two of them, but they did not call each other by name.'

Mr Cullen grunted, and she could have sworn he cursed under his breath. It seemed she'd displeased him again.



Phil paced up and down the gravel path outside the Pridhams' drawing room. Through the open window he could see Mrs Pridham still fussing over Sophia Turner. That girl would be the death of him, he was sure. He only had to turn his back and she was into another scrape. What was he going to do to keep her safe? He'd given his pledge to sort matters out about Mrs Newbody, but that woman had taken them all by surprise. If his guess was correct, she was behind that morning's bold abduction attempt.

'Penny for 'em, Cullen.' The admiral's gruff tones broke into Phil's thoughts. They'd both come outside, ostensibly to allow the older man to enjoy his pipe and tobacco. Mrs Pridham had now banned her husband from lighting his pipe indoors. Phil had opted to accompany the admiral into the garden, afraid that if he stayed too long in Miss Turner's company, he would say something he ought not to. She really had an unsettling effect on him. That morning, when he'd first set off, he'd been of a mind that nothing would induce him to offer for her – not even Mrs Pridham's heavy hints that he'd compromised her character. Then, on learning that Miss Turner was missing, possibly abducted, he'd been sick with worry, promising himself that he would move heaven and earth to find her and never let her out of his sight once he had her safely back. These promises had been driven out of his head by the sight of Miss Turner, seated as cool as a cucumber and sipping brandy in the inn's back parlour, surrounded by a gaggle of women. It was just as if she'd been on a jaunt to do some shopping.

Phil frowned. That lieutenant had been hovering there too. Had she made an assignation with him and it had gone wrong?

'Just wondering what Lieutenant Jenson was doing at the inn this morning. Bit of a coincidence.'

'I don't think so, my boy.' The admiral puffed out a ring of smoke and shook his head. 'His business is bound up with his ship at anchor in the harbour. He was probably organising stores to be sent aboard and came across all the commotion by accident.'

'It's strange that he didn't manage to identify which vehicle Miss Turner had escaped from.'

'Daresay it was such a crush that whoever it was who took her was able to slip away. Or at least disguise the fact that they'd been carrying an unwilling passenger.'

'Hmm...' Phil shrugged, not entirely convinced. 'I suppose.'

The admiral clapped a hand on Phil's shoulder. 'Don't brood over it. It is over

and done with. Sophia is safely restored to us.’ He took another puff from his pipe and gave Phil a thoughtful look. ‘I’d better get back inside. Why don’t I send out Sophia to you. I think after last night, you two ought to talk and decide what is to be done.’ He leaned forward and spoke in lowered tones. ‘I know Mrs Pridham is keen for you to marry the girl, but... Well, I am of the opinion that couples are best left to make up their own minds. Why not talk to her, sort out your differences one way or another?’

‘Yes, we need to talk.’ Phil continued his pacing. Lord, what was he going to say to her now? He had absolutely no idea.

Chapter 11



SOPHIA WATCHED AS PHIL paced up and down, hands behind his back. She had reluctantly agreed to the admiral's suggestion to talk to him alone, despite Emmaline's disapproving glances. Perhaps it would be better if she and Mr Cullen cleared the air between them.

The noise of her shoes on the gravel must have alerted him to her presence, for he spun round to face her. His face for once was not frowning. In fact, she could discern no particular emotion there. Her heart started to beat a little faster. It was a bit like approaching a dog that one didn't know – would he bite or wag his tail?

'You've decided to join me at last?'

Well, that didn't sound particularly friendly, but at least it hadn't been said with a growl. She forced a smile. 'Yes, Admiral Pridham suggested that we might discuss matters more easily on our own. Although Emmaline doesn't seem too happy.' Sophia indicated the window where Emmaline stood watching them. 'I think she does not trust us.'

She heard something that sounded like a curse, then Mr Cullen strode towards her and folded her arm round his own. 'Nonsense. What does she think I will do? Come along, Miss Turner, we will walk over to the shrubbery and sit on that bench over there.'

Before she knew it, she was being tugged along towards the wrought-iron bench situated at the end of the long formal garden. It was still in sight of the house but set at an angle, so that any observer would be unable to discern whether a couple seated there was engaged in flirtation or argument.

She smoothed her skirts and waited for Mr Cullen to start. He was sitting close, but not too close. Even so, she was very aware of his presence – his muscular thigh, encased in skin-tight riding breeches, mere inches from her own. Her cheeks began to get warm, and it was rather difficult to breathe. She wafted a hand in front of her face, hoping he wouldn't notice. He was staring intently at his boots.

'I noted that Lieutenant Jenson was with you when we arrived?' His sudden words, phrased as a question, took her by surprise.

'Erm... yes. I think he was at the back of the crowd when I was lying on the ground, and then he went off to try to discover which coach I had fallen from.' She frowned, trying to piece together the events. It had all been a bit confusing at the time. 'He'd returned to the inn only shortly before you and the admiral arrived. It's a pity whoever it was got away.' She looked up to see Mr Cullen

scrutinising her. 'What's the matter?' she asked. He was making her feel uncomfortable.

'A bit of a coincidence, don't you think?'

'What? You think he might be involved? I didn't think of that.' So that was it. Mr Cullen thought the lieutenant had something to do with things. She rested her chin on her cupped hand and pondered. 'You know, you could be right.'

A look of exasperation crossed his face. Sophia saw it and wondered at its cause. She was agreeing with him, for goodness' sake. Was there no pleasing this man?

'I didn't mean...' His voice trailed off.

'What did you mean?' she asked. Understanding suddenly dawned. Sophia shot off the bench and stood, hands on hips. She'd not been so angry in a long time. 'What do you take me for, Mr Cullen? You accused me the other day of thinking the worst of you. Now... now you are doing the exact same thing.'

Mr Cullen had leapt to his feet as soon as she'd stood up. Her vehemence had obviously surprised him. A flicker of uncertainty crossed his face, and he began to chew his lip. Sophia tapped her foot. If he didn't apologise straightaway, she would return to the house.

'I'm... I'm... I apologise wholeheartedly, Miss Turner. I just... Well, I jumped to the wrong conclusion. I saw him looking at you, and he seemed quite put out when the admiral and I turned up. I assumed...'

Sophia took a deep breath. It was pointless to continue arguing. He'd apologised, but there was something in what he said. Something that puzzled her.

'Are you jealous, Mr Cullen?'

'Me? No. Why ever would you think that?' He was looking at the point of his booted foot again, avoiding her eye.

'Hmm. Well, I thought at first that the lieutenant might be jealous. He certainly looked angry when we left. Perhaps I was mistaken.' She looked at Mr Cullen's flushed cheeks. It was rather a sultry afternoon. 'Let us sit down again and discuss this rationally.' She settled back onto the bench and patted the space beside her. The idea that the lieutenant was involved somehow in her abduction seemed highly improbable. Now, if it had been Lieutenant Ashdown... She told herself that Lieutenant Jenson's angry looks were probably due to something else entirely. Thinking about it, she remembered he'd looked angry on the quayside. There was something evidently bothering him, and he was just poor at hiding his feelings. He was quite young, after all.



Phil winced inwardly. Why was he making such a mull of things? No wonder she was annoyed with him. He'd practically accused her of trying to run off with that wet-behind-the-ears lieutenant. And she was quite correct. He was jealous. The

thought that she might prefer that smooth-cheeked young sprig to him had been like a punch to the gut. Not that he had serious feelings for her. Oh no. He just didn't want to see her throw herself away on some lowly naval officer. She deserved somebody better. But not him... He was not ready to settle down, no matter what Mrs Pridham thought.

'What do you think we ought to do? Mrs Pridham seems so keen, but I do not want to be forced into marriage.'

Her words registered with his brain. 'Me neither.' The words were blurted out before he could stop himself. *Damn!* 'That was most ungentlemanly of me. Please forgive me, Miss Turner.'

'Well, at least you are honest.' She was giving him one of those looks that sent his pulse racing. It was as if she could see into his soul. He squirmed inwardly, praying she would not see him for what he really was. Then it came to him.

'We could pretend.'

'Pardon?' Incomprehension showed on her face.

'We could pretend to be engaged. At least for the time being. Then, after a suitable interval, you could decide that we no longer suit. If you break off the engagement, it will bring no shame on you, and it will hardly matter to me.'

The idea had come to him in a flash. If they pretended to be engaged, it would mean they could spend time in each other's company without creating too much scandal. Of course, there would be some scandal at the fact that he was marrying beneath him. He could ride it out. He'd never been bothered by society gossip. Uncle Ralph might object, but he could handle him, tell him a tale of love at first sight or other such nonsense. Besides, Ralph wasn't too high in the instep. Phil inwardly congratulated himself on coming up with such a splendid ploy. He would be able to keep her safe, and she would also be able to go about in society. And meet somebody more suitable than that milksop lieutenant. Somebody he might approve of. He didn't want her to marry the first man she met. Besides, it would be no hardship to spend more time with her. She was fiery for a female, with a liveliness of spirit. He'd never encountered a woman who challenged him as much as she did. Despite the irritation she sometimes provoked in him, he enjoyed their little spats. He'd just have to ensure there was a plausible reason for her to break the engagement when the time came – he didn't want her to suffer. He was sure to think of something when the time was right.

At last, he noticed the tight little smile on her lips. 'It could work, I suppose,' she muttered. For some reason, she looked a little crestfallen. 'Do you think we will be able to convince Emmaline and the admiral? I will feel very bad about deceiving them,' she added, looking away, her hands knotted in her lap. 'And you say it will bring no shame on me. I do not agree. I will be blamed, regardless of the reasons we give. A broken engagement always reflects badly on the woman concerned.'

He caught her hands, determined to convince her. 'No... I... I'll manufacture a reason so heinous on my part that everyone will say you had a lucky escape. Trust me. I will not let you suffer.' He didn't care about his own reputation. He wanted only to keep her safe.

She gave another sad little smile. 'Then I will trust you.'

Elated that he'd persuaded her, he continued. 'There's no need for you to worry. I'm sure we can carry it off. I can be very convincing. I played the part of a humble man of business for quite some time. I'm sure I can manage the appearance of a man in love.'

Her eyebrows arched, then she looked away again. Phil glanced back towards the window. Mrs Pridham was sure to be still keeping an eye on them. It gave him another idea.

'Come here.'

'Pardon?'

He leaned nearer, breathing in her scent of jasmine. He would never again smell jasmine without being reminded of her. He dared to place his arm about her shoulder.

'Stop! What are you doing?' Her hissed words did not match the look of longing in her eyes. His gaze locked with hers, then glided to her lips. The colour of ripe cherries, they were deliciously inviting. Her uneven breath was warm on his face.

'We have to convince people, remember? Let me kiss you. Please.' It was a lie. He didn't care about convincing the Pridhams. He needed to kiss her, and all his senses told him she felt the same way. Suddenly being this close to her sent all his resolutions to remain aloof fleeing. The fact that it would also help their plan was merely a very convenient coincidence. This overpowering desire to feel the softness of her lips on his own was becoming difficult to control.

'Well, if you're sure it's necessary...' she murmured.

He didn't wait a second longer.

He wasn't sure how long the kiss lasted. All he knew was that he didn't want it to stop. It was everything he'd hoped for... and much, much more. He could tell that she'd never kissed before. Her mouth moved in an unpractised way against his... at first. Then it was as if he'd unleashed something within her – passion and desire. He couldn't have stopped if he'd wanted to, and it seemed she felt the same. Until...

'I take it the pair of you have decided that you both suit.'

The admiral's gruff voice sent them springing apart. Phil took a deep breath and turned to face the older man. He was in a state of utter confusion. What had just happened? He'd intended to give her a chaste kiss – or as near to chaste as he could manage. But somehow he'd been swept away on a tide of passion. Her scent had filled his nostrils, and her soft lips had surrendered to his and then returned force for force. All had been feeling, sensation... and a deep sense of coming

home. What did it mean? He blinked at the admiral, who was standing legs apart and arms behind his back. Was that a twinkle in the older man's eye? Phil pulled himself together.

'Indeed, Admiral. Miss Turner has graciously agreed to become my wife.' He turned to see Miss Turner – Sophia, he supposed he was now at liberty to call her – staring at him wide-eyed. Her cheeks, the colour of roses, and her swollen, kiss-bruised lips sent a pang of desire to his loins. He ignored the sensation and focussed on her eyes. She seemed as confused as him. Forcing himself to act as if he were in charge of his own emotions, Phil took her by the arm, lacing his fingers in hers. He pulled her towards him so that they were both standing side by side to face the admiral. She was trembling, and beneath his fingers he felt her racing pulse.

'Yes, Admiral. Mr Cullen and I are engaged to be married.'

He heard the quaver in her voice, then held his breath at her next words. 'But it will be a long engagement. I cannot abandon dear Emmaline so soon for married life, especially as she has been so kind to me.'

She was more composed than he'd thought. Certainly more composed than he was. He hadn't given a thought as to how things were to be managed, but it was evident that she had. Beneath her façade of feminine confusion lurked a cool mind, he concluded. Something he'd seen hints of in London and which he was now privileged to experience once more.

The admiral, beaming, took Sophia in his arms and gave her a fatherly hug before holding out a hand to Phil.

'Knew you'd see sense, the pair of you.' Phil's hand was pumped up and down. For a man getting on in years, the admiral's handshake was vigorous. 'Come, let us go and share the good news with Emmaline.'

Phil, feeling as if matters were now totally out of his control, followed the admiral and Sophia – whose arm was now firmly lodged in the admiral's – back up to the house. If it hadn't been for a furtive, pleading glance that she sent to him over her shoulder, Phil would have been convinced that Sophia was perfectly happy with the morning's events.



It was more than an hour later before Sophia got back to the privacy of her room. Emmaline, her face wreathed in smiles, was awaiting them on their return to the drawing room. Then Admiral Pridham had insisted on sending for a bottle of champagne to celebrate the engagement. Sophia was forced to resign herself to pretending everything was fine until she could finally escape and put her thoughts in order. Mr Cullen hadn't helped. Oh, he'd spoken prettily to Emmaline, expressing how honoured he was to have convinced his bride-to-be to accept his offer, but beneath his veneer of smiles, Sophia could tell he was a troubled man.

Sophia slumped down on the window seat and gazed out across the garden, asking herself one question: what exactly had happened on the bench near the shrubbery? One minute she'd been calm, listening to Mr Cullen's plan of a pretend engagement. He'd made it all sound quite reasonable, glossing over the fact that it would cause scandal and upset, both at its beginning and at its end. He'd looked at her with eyes so intense and pleaded so earnestly that, against her better judgement, she'd allowed herself to be persuaded. Then the next minute he'd requested a kiss. Her surprise had turned to longing and anticipation. She might never get the chance again. Glimpsing Emmaline's anxious face at the window stiffened her conviction that it was a reasonable request. She'd told herself that they had to demonstrate to the Pridhams that their engagement was genuine. What harm could there be? There was also the fluttering of anticipation at the thought of experiencing her very first kiss... and with Mr Cullen. Or rather Phil, as she should now call him – a gentleman who had a strange, unsettling effect on her.

He'd reached for her, and she'd sunk into his embrace. When his lips met hers, it was as if something inside her had sprung into life. His tongue had teased her lips. She'd opened her mouth and the sensations grew. She caught his scent of citrus and fresh linen and longed to remain encircled by his arms forever. Was this how kissing was for everyone? No wonder young women were cautioned not to spend time alone with gentlemen, if it caused them to lose their wits as she had lost hers. Sophia groaned at the memory, her insides curling in embarrassment. It had only been the sound of the admiral's voice that had caused her to stop. How far would she have gone if they had been private for their first kiss? Good Lord, she must be a wanton! No wonder Mr Cullen could barely meet her eyes, knowing that he was for the moment tied to an unsuitable female. She had to let him know she'd never kissed anyone before and assure him that she would break their engagement on the first convenient occasion.

Sophia walked over to the cheval mirror to check her reflection. She still looked the same. There was nothing about her that would give a clue to the experience she'd just enjoyed. She whispered his name, and her heart skipped a guilty beat. What she would give to enjoy that kiss again. It had been wonderful. She smiled at her reflection. If she never kissed him, or any man again, she would always have the memory of that one kiss to cling to.

Chapter 12



PHIL RODE DOWN THE hill towards Falmouth feeling as if far more than a few hours had passed since his previous visit. In the intervening time, he had experienced a host of conflicting emotions, from the heights of passion and desire for the exasperating Sophia Turner to the depths of frustration and misery that perhaps her feelings were not at all engaged.

Wait a moment.

He did not want her feelings engaged, did he? It was only a pretend betrothal. But that kiss! He'd never experienced a kiss so overwhelmingly consuming before, and goodness knows, he'd done his share of kissing in the past. What was it about kissing Sophia Turner that turned his world upside down and sent his senses reeling? A shocking thought presented itself. Would it be so bad to be married... and to such a female? He sucked in his cheeks, running matters through his mind. It was several years since he'd turned thirty. All his friends were leg shackled. Even his erstwhile employer, Richard, who was several years younger, had married earlier that year. Could he be wrong in his belief that being wed meant being bored and unhappy? His friends didn't complain of boredom. None of them appeared unhappy. Once he accepted these unsettling thoughts, marriage didn't appear quite as repugnant an institution as he'd previously believed.

And Sophia... No other female had wielded such an overwhelming power over his emotions. She was intelligent, never boring, and certainly not cold towards him. If he wasn't much mistaken, at times she'd been as angry with him as he was with her. He chuckled, recalling how her hackles had risen when he'd tried to impose his authority by deciding her future. That had been a mistake. It had never really entered his head to ignore her wishes entirely. He wasn't an ogre, for goodness' sake. His initial compulsion to rescue Sophia had sprung from his guilt about Mary Weston. But now he realised with a jolt that his pledge was much more personal. He'd got to know her better and cared for her as a person. In fact, he could envisage no circumstance under which he would be prepared to abandon Sophia to her fate.

Phil's prime reason for avoiding marriage had been the example set by his parents. The coldness between them that had blighted both his and his brother's lives was a coldness he didn't wish to see repeated in any marriage of his own. But the Pridhams' marriage wasn't like that, and his uncle's marriage had been a happy one. Had he got it wrong? Was his parents' sad example the exception rather than the rule?

Another startling thought occurred to him. He was not his father. Why should he repeat his father's mistakes? Why had he not understood that before? *Too busy trying to expunge miserable childhood memories, that's why.* It was as if a weight had lifted from his shoulders. Phil smiled to himself. Perhaps it was time to put aside his qualms about wedlock. A long engagement would ensure he and Sophia would become better acquainted. They might even discover each other to be equally intriguing. How wonderful if her feelings matched his. Perhaps this pretend betrothal would indeed show them they'd each met their perfect match.

Phil, feeling considerably more light-hearted, made his way down Arwenack Street, passing the custom house. He looked to his right and saw the bustling public quays where the warehouses and cellars for the bonded goods were situated. Despite the late hour, it still looked busy, with gangs of workmen and sailors noisily loading and unloading goods onto the small tenders that plied between the landward side and the ships at anchor. He paused for a moment to breathe in the salt-laden air, then continued on to the Ship and Castle inn on Church Street. One of the clerks who worked for the post office in the packet office was a reliable source of information and could usually be found enjoying a drink or two there after work.

It had been agreed between the admiral and himself that he would make his own inquiries into what had happened that morning. Not that he mistrusted Sophia's version of events – rather he thought she might have missed a crucial clue that could lead them to the perpetrator. The Ship and Castle was also popular with naval officers. Perhaps he would find the Lieutenants Jenson and Ashdown there. He was looking forward to hearing what they had been doing that morning.

After giving up his horse to the care of the inn's ostler, Phil sauntered into the crowded taproom. He paused in the doorway, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the fug of smoke and the flickering light thrown off by the lamps. It was as he thought: a mixture of naval uniforms sprinkled in amongst those wearing civilian dress. It was noisy too. Shouts for more ale and bumpers of port vied with chatter about shipping news and the latest from Lisbon.

Phil spotted the man he wanted. Davey Pengarrow was a young man of slight build, currently engaged in a heated discussion with his colleague. Having purchased a tankard of ale at the bar, Phil picked his way through the throng to where Davey was still in conversation. The young man looked up and gave the slightest of nods.

'Any room at this table, gents? It's a bit crowded in here tonight.'

Davey remained silent, but his companion shuffled along the bench to make space for the newcomer. 'Shift yourself, Davey. Let this gent have a seat.'

Once seated, Phil raised his tankard. 'Good health, gentlemen.' The two men raised their own tankards in reply. 'Any news? I see from the white jacks that there are packet ships arrived.' Phil had spotted the distinctive white flags hoisted

on the main top gallant mastheads of several ships at anchor in the harbour on his ride down into Falmouth.

Davey's companion grimaced. 'Aye. We've been engaged in fumigating the damn mail. I stink of vinegar.'

Phil's nose wrinkled. So that was the distinctive odour assaulting his nostrils. 'Plague?'

It was Davey who piped up this time. 'Nah, yellow fever on board the *Princess Augusta* from the Windwards. Captain, surgeon, and more 'n ten seamen already dead. Only the mail can be landed until quarantine is over.'

A silence settled over the three men. Phil knew one of the hazards of travelling to the far-flung reaches of the world was the danger of disease. He heard Davey's deep sigh. 'Still, it's been more than sixteen days since the last death. Another week or so and mayhap the rest of the crew and passengers will be allowed to land. There's a lot of families hereabouts will be relieved when that happens, I can tell you, sir.'

'Indeed.' Phil raised his tankard again. 'Here's to no more deaths on the *Augusta*.'

The three men clinked their tankards together. After a moment or two, Phil broached the subject he was keen to discover more about. 'Were either of you two gentlemen around earlier today on the quayside? There was a bit of a commotion, it seems.'

'You mean that young lass? Kidnapped, I heard, but managed to get herself free.'

Phil felt a dig in his ribs as Davey leaned in to speak. 'Word is yon lieutenant.' Davey indicated a group of naval gentlemen seated in a far corner, amongst whom sat Lieutenant Jenson. 'He made a mull of catching the blackguards responsible. Charged up the quayside, knocked over some barrels, sent everything flying. There was fish, rope, and tackle everywhere. By the time he and his men were sorted, there wasn't a hope in hell of catching whoever had done it.'

There was a snigger from his companion. 'God help our navy with the likes of him in charge. Only hope old Boney don't get wind of what nincompoops we have, or he'll be over here in a flash.'

Phil smiled in outward agreement. He was pretty certain Lieutenant Jenson was no nincompoop. But it was an oddity that a sure-footed naval man accustomed to coping with heaving decks had fallen foul of a few barrels on the quayside. As if aware that he was being discussed, the lieutenant turned his head and looked directly at Phil. Phil wasn't sure if he imagined the brief narrowing of the lieutenant's eyes before the younger man's face relaxed into a smile of acknowledgement.

An hour or so later, Phil's companions drifted off. But their time together had proved fruitful. Davey had conveyed some valuable information about one of the

vessels at anchor in the Roads, as the outer reaches of the harbour were known to locals. It, too, was flying the quarantine flag, so it had been given a wide berth by other shipping. It wasn't one of the Falmouth packets or a naval vessel.

'Seems to be some sort of private merchantman returned from the Mediterranean, according to the customs officers. They're waiting for the all-clear before boarding her,' Davey told Phil in the short interval they were on their own, his companion having staggered away to pay a visit to the necessary. 'Don't look that laden to me, though. She's high in the water. I'll be surprised if they're carrying much.'

'Mmm, how long until the quarantine is over?'

'Couple of days, I think. Maybe a week.'

Phil nodded and filed away the information to ponder on later.

It wasn't many minutes after Davey and his friend had left that Phil was joined by Jenson. It saved him the trouble of getting up and forcing himself on the now-raucous group of naval officers, Phil thought wryly, watching as they loudly encouraged one of the harassed serving wenches to join them at their table. She dealt with them deftly by tipping a flagon of ale over the breeches of one of their number.

'A noisy crowd you are with, Lieutenant,' Phil said with a grin as Jenson sat down to face him.

'Don't know why they bother the women here. There are houses hereabouts with more willing females... or so I've been told.' Jenson's eyes flickered. 'How is Miss Turner? Has she recovered from her fright this morning?'

Phil leaned back and took a draught of his ale. It hadn't taken Jenson long to get to the point. 'She has indeed, Lieutenant, completely.'

Jenson coughed. 'That is good to know. I... I wouldn't want to think of such a lovely young lady being made afraid by such a peculiar and unusual experience.'

'Such a shame that you were unable to apprehend the culprit.'

'Indeed it was. Blasted barrel rolled out in front of me. Managed to skid on the cobbles and damned near broke my neck.' There was something about Jenson's vehemence...

Jenson cast a quick glance over his shoulder, then turned to lean across the table, his voice lowered. 'Must tell you... bit awkward.'

Phil found he was whispering too. 'What?'

'Lieutenant Ashdown. I'm fairly certain it was he who tried to abduct Miss Turner.'

Phil tensed, prickles of unease shooting down his spine. 'Are you sure?' Had he been focussed on the wrong man? Jenson's words made sense. Ashdown had been quite open about his admiration for Sophia at Pendennis Castle, and he had not bothered to hide his annoyance when Phil had taken her home.

'He did nothing but talk about her. Totally smitten and determined to have her

– by fair means or foul. I must warn you, Mr Cullen. Ashdown usually gets what he wants.’ Jenson tapped the side of his nose. ‘There was a girl in Portsmouth... Well, I won’t go into details, but that is why he is still a lieutenant.’

‘I see.’ A cold anger seethed in Phil’s breast. He would sort Ashdown out once and for all. ‘Where is Lieutenant Ashdown this evening?’

‘On board. He’s duty officer. When he returned to the ship this afternoon, he was looking mighty angry. I put two and two together.’ Jenson fiddled with his cuff, pulling at the braid. ‘I understand he has a cousin here, lives on the other side near Flushing. Perhaps that’s where he intended to take her.’

‘Do you know this cousin’s name?’ Phil’s knuckles whitened around the handle of his tankard.

‘Upton. He’s a packet commander. Away on one of the West Indies runs, I understand, so his house is standing empty.’ Jenson gave Phil an earnest look, as if regretting what he’d just said. ‘I hope you will not act on my suspicions, Mr Cullen. They are only suspicions. I have no proof.’

‘Thank you for sharing them with me, Lieutenant. You can be sure I will do nothing precipitate.’ Phil stood up and shook the lieutenant’s hand, dropping some coins on the table before departing. ‘Have a drink on me.’

Jenson scooped the coins into his pocket and went to rejoin his comrades. He was smiling.



Phil, a rigid scowl on his face, rode back home in the growing darkness, turning over in his mind all that Jenson had told him. He couldn’t very well go up to Ashdown and accuse him of abduction without proof. If the man denied it, and likely he would, there would be an almighty fuss... and that would draw unwelcome attention to himself. No, he had to get evidence of the man’s evil intent. Then it came to him. First thing in the morning, he would take a boat over to Flushing and have a look at this cousin’s house. Ashdown must have made some arrangements to secure Sophia there, and that would be proof enough.

Still scowling, Phil urged his mount into a gallop. The moon was out, making the road ahead clear enough to see any looming potholes. Another thing he must do, he reminded himself, was to send a message to the admiral, telling him of his suspicions about Ashdown and warning him not to let him near Sophia. Phil’s jaw clenched. She must stay indoors until this matter was sorted. Should he also write a note to her? She was, after all, his betrothed now, so there could be no objection on the grounds of propriety. But would she heed his instructions? He’d never encountered a more intriguing and confusing female. She looked like a milk-and-water miss, all soft curves and a sweet beguiling smile, but underneath, there lurked determination and an intelligent mind – as he knew to his cost.

It was curious how possessive of her he felt. He’d wanted to strike out when

Jenson had spoken of Ashdown's plans. In fact, when he'd first arrived at the inn, it had taken all his resolve not to march straight up to Jenson, who he'd initially suspected, and plant him a facer. Up to then, he'd been convinced that Jenson was somehow involved, or certainly responsible for letting the culprit escape. It was a good thing for once he hadn't acted on his impulses.

Phil's scowl relaxed into a smile. He was becoming accustomed to thinking of her as his betrothed. Who would have thought it? He, a bachelor and an adventurer, looking to settle down. His uncle for one should be pleased. He'd been urging Phil to marry for some time. But whether he'd be pleased at Phil's choice of bride... Well, that was another matter. Phil grinned, imagining Uncle Ralph's face when he received the news. Ralph had gone off in high dudgeon as soon as Phil had returned home to Cornwall. The so-called difficulties of running the estate and Ralph's reports of ill health had been merely ploys to get Phil to face up to his responsibilities. 'Well, Ralph, you've got your wish,' Phil said aloud as he turned his horse through the gates of his property.



Next morning at first light, Phil was at his desk, hurriedly composing notes for the admiral and Sophia. He'd reasoned that if both he and the admiral instructed her to remain indoors, she would be obliged to listen. As he sanded the one to her, he gazed at her name and brushed his lips against the paper.

How he wanted to repeat that kiss.

The memory of it, scorched on his brain, had kept him awake most of the night. He was still staring into space when the chimes of the study clock marking the hour brought him back to his senses. He jumped up and pulled on his coat. He needed to get over to Flushing. Sealing both letters with wafers, he rang for Stephens and gave the butler his instructions.

'But sir, you have not breakfasted! Let me fetch you something...'

Stephens' words echoed round the empty hall as the door closed behind his master.

The early morning mist was rising off the water as Phil reached Greenbank Quay. As luck would have it, the first ferry of the day from Flushing had arrived moments earlier and it would be ready to return within the hour. Deciding he had enough time, he entered the Green-Bank Commercial and Packet Hotel and bespoke himself some cold beef, bread, and cheese. Together with a small tankard of ale, it would set him up for the day. Settling in a corner of the front parlour, he kept one eye on the comings and goings of the quayside as he ate his hasty meal. A few fellows lounged about outside, springing into action to offer their portering services when laden hotel residents emerged. The hotel was a popular place for passengers intending to sail on the packet ships.

There were few passengers besides Phil on the small vessel that plied its way

the short distance across the Penryn River to Flushing. Apart from a squalling child, whose noise he couldn't ignore, Phil's whole attention was on the small settlement looming into view. Although smaller than Falmouth, Flushing boasted some fine waterfront properties, the homes of the many wealthy packet-ship commanders who had settled there over the years. There were also numerous cottages and warehouses, for Flushing had once rivalled Falmouth in victualling and watering the growing packet-ship trade, and many packet-ship crewmen lived there too.

As he alighted on the quayside, one of the last to disembark from the bobbing ferry, Phil held out his arm to the careworn mother who was still trying to placate her wailing child.

'Thank you, sir,' she said, once she was safely on the cobbles. 'I do apologise for my little 'un's noise. He be cutting a tooth, and it do make him rather crotchety.'

'Do you live over this side?' Phil was hoping she was local and would be able to direct him to Upton's house.

'No, sir. Not now. Just visiting my mam. Me and Sam moved across the river when we were married.'

Hiding his disappointment, Phil continued the conversation as they strolled up one of the narrow alleys that led off the waterfront. 'You must miss seeing your mother every day.'

'Aye, I do, sir. Especially now this little 'un is around. Mam knows how to settle him, see.'

Phil glanced at the howling, red-faced child clutched in his mother's arms. How could anyone bear that noise? And the look the doting mother was giving to her son – well, he'd never seen anyone so besotted. It was beyond his comprehension. Phil smiled uncertainly at his companion who was now waving to an elderly lady standing at the door of one of the cottages.

'That's Mam there, sir. Thank you for your help.'

'It was my pleasure. I wonder... Could you direct me?'

Before he could ask his question, Phil was interrupted by the old lady who had bustled forward to relieve her daughter of her noisy burden and was now crooning incomprehensible words to the child in her arms.

'There, there, poor bairn. Is your toothy-pegs a-hurting?'

To Phil's amazement, the wailing stopped.

'Mam, this gentleman helped me off the boat and is looking for directions. You know everyone here. Can you tell him the way he needs?'

The old woman dragged her eyes off the now-dozing child. Phil thought the child's sleeping state was more likely due to exhaustion from non-stop crying than any magical powers possessed by his grandmother. She gave Phil a smile that exposed the gaps in her gums.

'I'd be glad to direct you, sir. Where you be looking for?'

‘I’m looking for a man called Upton. I believe he has a house over here.’

The old woman’s face crinkled into a smile. ‘Aye, I knows Cap’n Upton. A good commander. Two of my boys serve with him. But you won’t find him home. He’s away just now, on the Jamaica run.’

Phil’s mind raced to come up with a reason for visiting the house in the captain’s absence. ‘I have something for him. Perhaps I could leave it with one of his servants.’

The old woman nodded. ‘His house is over yon, on New Road. It’s the first one at the end. You show him, Maggie.’

The young woman led him back down the alleyway and pointed up to a row of fine townhouses. From their prominent position overlooking the waterfront, Phil thought they were an ideal location for a packet-ship commander who wanted to keep an eye on his ship.

‘Thank you for your help. Here’s something for the little one.’ Phil handed the young woman several coins.

‘There’s no need...’

‘Please take it, ma’am.’ Phil doffed his hat and strode away, not giving her a chance to argue.

It took him but five minutes to walk from the quayside and up the hill to New Road. The house belonging to Ashdown’s cousin was an imposing three-storeyed building. The window shutters were closed, and the door knocker had been removed. To Phil’s frustration, there appeared to be no way to enter unseen from the front. Frowning, he walked along the terrace and turned at the corner to view the houses from the rear. This was better. It didn’t take him long to identify the one he wanted, and it was an easy job to force the rear gate into the garden. There was a nasty moment when he thought someone had heard him, but it was just a groom tending to the horses on the neighbouring property calling out to a stable lad.

Phil tried the handle of one of the doors, guessing it led to the servants’ quarters at the back. To his surprise, it turned easily, and he pushed it open. There was no awkward squealing of hinges. The door moved smoothly, and he saw it opened on to a flagstone passage. Heart thumping in his chest, he moved forward, convinced that he was on to something. Why else would the door be open? Ashdown probably had everything planned. Phil’s mouth twisted in anticipation of discovering something that would prove Ashdown’s guilt as he continued to move stealthily along the passageway.

He opened all the doors along the corridor, but each darkened room contained nothing of interest. It was time to venture upstairs. The stairs creaked under his feet, but he told himself it didn’t matter. Ashdown was still on duty on board ship, and the house was, to all intents and purposes, empty. Truth to tell, Phil was feeling buoyant. It had been a while since he’d had occasion to act the spy, and

he'd quite missed the feeling of exhilaration it gave him. The only sensation that had come near to matching it was the excitement he'd felt when kissing Sophia. The thought of Sophia spurred him on. There was no way that rogue Ashdown would get his filthy hands on her.

Continuing upwards, Phil paused at the top of the stairs, debating which door on the landing to open first. The one on the left looked the most promising. By his reckoning, it should be a chamber with views to the rear. Ashdown would surely have chosen a prison from which a captive would not be able to attract the attention of passers-by should she manage to get near the window.

He turned the handle and stepped into the gloomy room. A heady perfume hung in the air. Phil sniffed, trying to place it. His eye caught the shape of what looked like a woman's turban lying on the counterpane of the bed in the centre of the room. He moved forward and heard the door close behind him. Before he could turn, a husky female voice spoke from the shadows of the far corner.

'Mr Cullen, what kept you? I've been waiting an age for you to arrive.'

'What the...?' Before he could move, a heavy object landed on his head, and everything before his eyes dissolved into blackness.

Chapter 13



SOPHIA WOKE UP TO the sun shining through the shutters and the sound of birds singing. It took her a moment to think why it didn't seem right. Her sleepy eyes saw the clock on the mantelpiece. Good Lord! It had gone nine. She sprang out of bed. How had she managed to sleep so long? She should be up and about, ready to offer her company and assistance to Emmaline. Splashing her hands and face with cold water, she made a hasty toilette, dressed, and pinned her hair up. All the time, her mind was whirring. How was she going to face the day? Having to deceive Emmaline and the admiral about her betrothal to Mr Cullen did not seem right.

She stilled in the act of tucking her fichu into the top of her dress. Mr Cullen's face swam before her eyes – she still had not accustomed herself to thinking of him as Phil. Such a handsome face. Strong. Dark eyes with hidden depths. Eyes that could flare into anger, yet yesterday they had been filled with tenderness. The feel of his skin against hers as they'd kissed, the slight grazing of stubble against her cheek. The taste of his lips, firm and demanding. It had been another of those rare times when she'd felt completely protected and loved. Was this how Emmaline felt when kissed by her husband? Was this how Hannah felt in the Reverend Simpson's embrace?

But she couldn't allow herself to get carried away. He'd said it was a pretend engagement to get them out of a fix. No matter how much she craved more of the wonderful sensation of being the focus of someone's entire desire, the centre of someone else's universe, it wasn't for her. No-one really loved her. She'd never been loved. Mrs Archer had fed and clothed her, but she'd never offered her affection. Dear Hannah Simpson had shown affection and friendship, but her love was reserved for her husband and sons – as it should be. To Emmaline and the admiral, she was the substitute for a daughter.

Her eyes glanced round the room at the comfortable bed with its quilted eiderdown, the expensive Turkey carpet on the floor, the basin and ewer decorated with dainty flowers on the washstand, a silver-backed hairbrush and hand mirror next to them: gifts from Emmaline. She blinked, as if seeing them for the first time. This didn't look like the room of someone who was unloved. Had she become so accustomed by years of emotional neglect and thinking of herself as unlovable that she'd become blind to the fact that there were people who did love her? People like the Pridhams and the Simpsons. Perhaps she should start to believe in her own worth and not wallow in self-pity, she told herself. While she

could never believe that Mr Cullen had real feelings for her, a glimmer of hope kindled in her breast.

Sophia sniffed and wiped at her eyes. This would never do. She was upset because of all the danger and excitement of the previous day. Not because of a kiss. She needed to do what she'd always done: remain calm and strong and be dutiful – not lose herself in fanciful imaginings about Mr Cullen. Taking one last look in the mirror, she left to find Emmaline.



The morning turned out easier to deal with than she expected. Emmaline, of course, had spoken excitedly about the engagement but had graciously allowed the matter to be dropped when she saw her young companion somewhat subdued. For that, Sophia was grateful. It was difficult enough having to lie. There was no way she could pretend enthusiasm for an event she knew would never happen. There had also been a letter from Mr Cullen. It had been a short note urging her to remain indoors and hinting that soon all would be sorted. She wondered whether he meant the false engagement or the apprehension of her would-be abductor. It wasn't clear. But the part of the letter that had made her heart skip a beat were the words 'Yours affectionately, Philip'. Oh, if only those words were true! True or not, she would treasure that letter forever.

'Is everything all right, my dear? You look a little flushed.' Emmaline's words jolted Sophia out of her thoughts. She finished folding the note and tucked it into the pocket of her apron.

'Yes, thank you, Emmaline. Mr Cullen has merely advised that I should remain indoors.' Sophia's eyes turned to the window. 'A shame on such a lovely day.'

Emmaline set down her embroidery. 'Never mind, dear. I'm sure Mr Cullen will soon be reporting that the person who tried to abduct you has been identified and caught. He indicated as much in a missive he sent to the admiral.'

Through the open window came the sound of wheels rumbling over the gravel, sending Emmaline hurrying to peer through the glass. For an older lady, she was surprisingly nimble on her feet.

'Now, I wonder who that can be? Oh dear, they've already been admitted.' She turned back to Sophia, a twinkle in her eye. 'Never mind. Let us retire to the drawing room. I'm sure that, whoever it is, the admiral will bring them in to join us.'

As predicted, it wasn't long before the business that had brought the visitor to see the admiral was concluded and they both joined the ladies in the drawing room.

'Look who has come to pay his respects, my dears,' he said, ushering in Lieutenant Jenson. Jenson bowed to both ladies. In his naval uniform of dark-blue jacket embellished with shiny brass buttons and teamed with white wool

breeches, the lieutenant looked very dashing. The angry tension that had so marred his face the previous day was no longer present, Sophia was pleased to note. Whatever had caused it had evidently been resolved.

‘Good day, Mrs Pridham, Miss Turner.’ Jenson’s eyes lingered on Sophia. ‘I had to call to ensure myself that you were quite recovered from the events of yesterday.’ He smiled, revealing the slight gap between his two front teeth. He reminded Sophia of Hannah’s eldest boy – a gentle, happy-go-lucky young man.

‘How kind, Lieutenant,’ Emmaline answered for her. ‘Sophia was indeed shaken, but I’m endeavouring to lift her spirits.’

‘I am quite well, sir, as you see.’ Sophia returned his smile. The poor chap was still probably feeling wounded at being outmanoeuvred at her rescue, so a little kindness on her part would not go amiss.

‘Come and sit with us a while and tell us the news. There is bound to be news of some sort, I know, what with the comings and goings of the packet ships.’ Emmaline gestured to the sofa opposite.

‘I will indeed be happy to, ma’am.’ The lieutenant raised the tails of his jacket and sat down, while the admiral made himself comfortable in his favourite chair.

After some lively conversation whereby Lieutenant Jenson made himself agreeable answering all of Emmaline’s questions, he addressed Sophia.

‘Miss Turner, as it is such a fine day, I wondered if you would care to accompany me for a brief drive along the coast. It might soothe your nerves.’

Sophia was about to refuse when the admiral interrupted.

‘A kind thought, Jenson, my boy. But perhaps not, after yesterday’s events.’

Lieutenant Jenson’s face fell, and Sophia felt sorry for him. Poor chap, he was trying to help again and was once more being foiled. She decided to step in.

‘I’m sure the lieutenant will be able to keep me safe from any scoundrels, won’t you, sir?’ She wasn’t entirely happy about driving out after yesterday, but nor did she wish to see Jenson’s eager schoolboy character destroyed. Hannah had confided in her that males – contrary to their strong outward demeanours – could have very fragile self-esteem.

The lieutenant puffed up his chest. ‘I will certainly keep you safe, Miss Turner. You can be sure of that. I understand that Mr Cullen is this very day searching out the person responsible for your unfortunate experience of yesterday... or so he told me last night.’

So Mr Cullen had confided in the lieutenant? Then no doubt there would be no harm in a brief excursion. Sophia looked at Emmaline, who in turn looked at her husband.

‘Oh, very well. I suppose in that case there should not be too much risk. But not too far, mind,’ said the admiral grudgingly.

Emmaline smiled approvingly. ‘It’s settled then, a short ride only. The air will do you good after yesterday’s shock, and I will use your absence to write a letter

to Kitty.'

'If you are absolutely sure, ma'am?'

Emmaline waved her away, and Sophia hastened upstairs to fetch her pelisse and bonnet.

'I took the liberty of hiring a chaise in the expectation that you would be happy to drive with me.' Lieutenant Jenson negotiated the sharp turn from the admiral's property onto the road, then turned his head to give Sophia a gap-toothed smile. 'I'm so pleased you agreed.'

'Yes, it is nice to be out. I'm afraid I do not like to be indoors on a day like today. It was very thoughtful of you to think of me.'

'A pleasure, Miss Turner.' He was looking very pleased with himself.

They chatted easily, Sophia recounting her early life in Crawley and confiding how much she enjoyed reading and being in the countryside. The lieutenant told her about his early years at sea. He'd been sent by his mother, a widow, who'd wanted him to do well and enjoy the finer things in life.

'She thought my joining His Majesty's navy would be the best way to make my mark on the world. I was rather against it at first. I preferred to stay in London and join the family business.'

'And what is that, Lieutenant?'

'I suppose you could say we are merchants of sorts. We contrive to obtain what people require, for which they pay us handsomely.'

'How interesting. Such as?' Sophia's curiosity grew.

The corners of the lieutenant's mouth curled upwards. 'All sorts... jewellery, exclusive wines, other... luxuries.'

'I see.' She didn't really. Why didn't he just say his family were shopkeepers? Was he ashamed of his family's trade? For some reason, she felt disappointed with him. They lapsed into silence.

The drive continued in silence for several minutes. Despite the awkwardness, Sophia was trying to enjoy the views of open green fields on one side and the distant glimpses of the sea on the other. She told herself she was being unfair to the lieutenant. He was a young man aiming to make his way in the world, and his reticence about his background was natural. Coming from trade, he probably feared being barred from advancement. These thoughts occupied her mind for several moments before she realised that she didn't recognise any landmarks. Where were they going? She'd assumed the lieutenant would be driving back towards the Pridhams' property, but they appeared to be heading in a completely different direction. She was about to inquire when he spoke.

'Dear me, I do believe this horse is about to cast a shoe. Would you mind terribly if I turn off the road and head to that house over there? They're sure to have someone who can help.'

Sophia, who wasn't much acquainted with horses, or the signs of them casting a shoe, looked askance at the lieutenant. His face, so open and honest beneath his sandy curls, quashed her growing qualms. There was bound to be a female in residence, or at least a female servant, in whose company she could stay, she told herself.

‘Not at all, Lieutenant. If you believe that to be the best course of action.’

He patted her arm. ‘Knew you were a sensible young woman.’ He clicked his tongue and flicked the reins, turning the carriage deftly up the narrow lane towards the house. To Sophia's eyes, there didn't appear to be anything wrong with the horse. It was trotting just as easily as before. Oh well, she must allow that the lieutenant knew what he was doing.

The chaise drew to a halt in front of a decent-sized property. It was two storeyed, but nothing like the dimensions of the admiral's residence. Sophia supposed it belonged to a fairly well-to-do farmer or suchlike.

Instead of knocking at the door, the lieutenant came directly to her side and held out his hand for her to take. ‘Let me help you down, Miss Turner.’

‘Shouldn't you see if someone is at home first? I mean...’ A sense of unease began to grow in Sophia's breast. Lieutenant Jenson was looking confident. In his face, there was no sign of concern about their predicament or indeed concern for his horse, which was now nibbling the grass on the verge of the drive.

Before she knew it, her arm was gripped, the lieutenant's fingers digging into her flesh, and she was pulled down into his grasp. Stunned, she offered no resistance as he swung her easily into his arms and carried her towards the now-open door, where a horribly familiar figure awaited.

Chapter 14



PHIL CRACKED ONE EYE open. He couldn't make out where he was, but he knew it definitely wasn't his bedchamber. And everything was swaying, giving him an unpleasant sensation of nausea. Why did his head ache so and how much had he drunk last night? He struggled to sit up and found he couldn't. His legs were tied together. He attempted to move his arms and discovered they were tied too. He sniffed the air. There was an unpleasant reek, something rotting, overlaid with a fishy odour. A scuttling sound told him that he was not alone, no doubt rats and other vermin, attracted by the smell.

'So, you're awake at last.'

The unexpected voice from the shadows made him start. It was a man's voice. One he was sure he'd heard before.

'Where am I?' Phil's question came out as a growl.

'You might well ask.' His companion, too, sounded strangely annoyed.

'I demand you untie me. There will be the devil to pay if you don't.'

'I daresay there will, but I'm afraid I'm unable to oblige.'

Phil's temper rose. Whoever it was, was playing games with him and he didn't like it. He had a vague recollection of what had happened just before he'd blacked out. He'd been in a house, looking for evidence of Ashdown's wrongdoing. There had been a woman. Then it came to him. The voice with its arrogant drawl... It was Ashdown's.

'Ashdown, you blackguard! Untie me at once. I'll see you flogged round the fleet for this.'

'Well you can try, but it won't wash, Mr Cullen. I told you, I'm unable to oblige, much as I'd like to assist you. I was rather hoping you might be able to help me.'

'What the hell do you mean? Surely not Miss Turner, you devil? I'll see you dead first.'

'What's Miss Turner got to do with this?' Ashdown sounded genuinely puzzled. A sliver of doubt crept into Phil's brain.

'I thought you were determined to have Miss Turner, or so I was told.'

'Ah... My estimable colleague and his lies again. This begins to make sense.'

'What does?' Phil was growing increasingly frustrated. 'She is betrothed to me now, in any case.'

'Well, I wish you happy, Mr Cullen. I even promise to dance at your wedding, should we get out of here alive.'

'What do you mean?'

‘I mean, Mr Cullen, we are both prisoners here.’

Phil felt as if he’d been doused in cold water. What was he doing tied up in some dark hellhole with Ashdown for company? Was it his imagination or was the room he was in moving?

‘Where is here?’

‘I believe we are on board a ship, Mr Cullen. I’ve been long enough at sea to know that much at least.’

Phil, stunned by Ashdown’s disclosure, thought his companion was remarkably calm considering their circumstances. Tied up and at sea. Why? And more importantly, who? He racked his brain for answers. The woman, of course! Mrs Harris, or Ruth Newbody to give the woman her real name. But what was she doing in the house at Flushing? What did she have to do with Ashdown’s cousin? None of it made sense.

‘Do you know how you got here, Ashdown?’

There was a long sigh. ‘At last. You’re beginning to ask useful questions, Mr Cullen. I was beginning to think that the knock to your head had addled your brains.’

‘Get on with it, Ashdown.’ The man’s nonchalance was starting to grate on Phil’s nerves.

‘Well... I’d just finished my watch and was going ashore. There’s a tavern I know with a very accommodating serving wench... mmm... Never mind. Before I got there, I was passed a note telling me to go to Flushing. There was someone there with important information.’

‘At your cousin’s house?’

‘What? I have no cousin in Flushing. I was given an address only.’

‘I was told the house where I was captured belongs to your cousin Captain Upton.’

‘My cousin? Of course not, though I’ve heard of him. He’s a packet commander on the Jamaica run. I’m guessing he knows nothing of this. Nevertheless, once the Admiralty hear of this, he will be watched.’

‘Never mind that for now,’ said Phil. ‘What sort of information were you expecting?’

‘Really, Mr Cullen? There is a war on... Use your brain.’ There was another sigh. ‘Still, I don’t suppose it can do any harm now. We are both for Davy Jones’ locker, if I’m not mistaken.’

‘Let me guess, you work for the government when you are ashore?’ Phil had been told that many naval officers continued with intelligence work on land as well as at sea.

‘Aye.’

‘We are on the same side then, you and I.’

There was a chuckle. ‘How like them not to tell us. We’ve been blundering

round each other when we could have been working together. I was told to make the acquaintance of Mrs Harris – see what I could find out about her. There were suspicions about her true identity. It seems they were correct. Anyway, I was waylaid at the house. You must have turned up later, for we were both transported here together. You were dead to the world. Thought that tame ogre of hers had killed you. He was boasting that he owed you one, and so he'd given you a blow hard enough to fell an ox.'

'Luckily, he didn't kill me. Though my head hurts like the devil.' Phil groaned. 'I will pay him back for that when I get the chance.'

'If you get the chance, Cullen. We must rid ourselves of our bonds first.'

'I know. No more time for exchanging stories, Ashdown. Have you got a plan?'

'You are talking to one of His Britannic Majesty's finest naval officers... Of course I've got a plan.' Phil couldn't help grinning. Ashdown was an arrogant bastard, but if he was as resourceful as he was insinuating, they might just stand a chance.



Summoning her nerves, Sophia screamed, but Jenson took no notice, continuing up the steps to the front door where Mrs Newbody's doorman was standing, a malicious curl on his lips.

'Is everything ready, Dobbs?'

'Aye, master. We'll have her off at the next tide. The mistress is already aboard.'

'Let's not make a hash of it this time, eh?' Jenson turned his attention back to Sophia, who inwardly cringed at the hard look in his eyes. Why had she ever thought him a guileless schoolboy?

'Will you shut up screaming? No-one can hear you.' His carefully modulated voice was now a snarl.

Sophia did as she was told. Her sense was telling her he spoke the truth. It would be better if she conserved her energy for when she could actually achieve something. She needed to keep her wits about her. Then Dobbs' words sank home. They were talking about putting her on a ship. Why?

Seemingly pleased at the effect his words had had on her, Jenson smiled. His gap-toothed mouth didn't look so innocent now. 'You do have sense for a female. She was right.'

He set her down on wobbly feet, and she heard the door close behind her. She rubbed her arm; it was red and sore from where he had grabbed her.

'Sorry about that,' he said with a smirk. 'You should have given me your hand when I asked you nicely. Never mind.'

Jenson strode over to Dobbs, who was still glaring at her from his post by the front door. It was evident from his sour looks that he resented the fact that she'd

escaped – not only from the brothel but also, she guessed, from his more recent abduction attempt.

Jenson held out his hand. ‘Have you got it?’

Dobbs pulled a small bottle out of his pocket and passed it to him.

‘Keep an eye on her. I’m not taking any chances.’ Jenson turned back to Sophia. ‘I won’t be a moment.’ He opened the door into one of the rooms off the hallway and stepped inside.

Sophia looked about her. There were stairs to one side... Perhaps if she ran up there, she could lock herself in a room long enough for someone to notice her absence at home. She glanced back at Dobbs, who shook his head and grinned. Her mouth involuntarily twisted. No, that wouldn’t work. He was built like a prize-fighter. A door wouldn’t stay long on its hinges with his weight against it. She sighed and feigned nonchalance. There must be something she could do.

The sound of a door opening alerted her to Jenson’s return. He was holding a glass.

‘Drink this,’ he ordered, holding it out to her.

Her mouth clamped shut, and she shook her head.

‘Don’t be foolish.’ He gave her a sly smile. ‘It will just make you a little sleepy. We can’t afford accidents getting you aboard.’

‘What?’

‘You heard. You’re going on a little voyage.’ He was now smirking, and she had the sudden urge to dash the glass out of his hand and wipe the expression off his face. Instead, she decided to play for time.

‘A voyage? Where?’

‘It can’t do any harm, I suppose. You’re off to France.’

An icy shiver went down her spine. None of it made sense. At first she’d thought Jenson had seduction in mind, with his jealousy towards Phil and his mad attempt at abduction. But this was more than that... And somehow Ruth Newbody was involved. Why else would her henchman Dobbs be a part of it? Was the woman hell-bent on revenge because she’d escaped her in London? And why France of all places; weren’t they at war? And how was Jenson connected? Had Ruth Newbody managed to coerce him somehow into doing as she asked?

Before she could puzzle it further, her arms were roughly pulled back. She’d been so intent on Jenson that she hadn’t noticed Dobbs moving away from the door. His arms were like vices, keeping her immobile.

‘Wait,’ she yelped, as Jenson move forward, the glass poised in his hand. ‘You don’t want to do that. It’s laudanum, isn’t it? I can’t keep the contents of my stomach down when I take laudanum. It makes me violently ill.’

Jenson’s self-confident expression faltered and changed to one of distaste. ‘Are you telling the truth?’

‘Of course I am. Sometimes just the smell of it is enough...’ She pulled a face,

as if about to heave.

Jenson hastily backed away. 'Help me tie her up, Dobbs... And this time do it properly.' Setting the glass down on a side table, he pulled a length of cord out of his pocket. 'You'd better behave, madam, or it will be the worse for you. You've already caused us enough trouble.'

Sophia allowed herself to be tied up, this time with her hands bound behind her. She was then marched through the house, along echoing corridors and past empty chambers, until they reached a small storeroom, where she was locked in. Unable to see in the pitch dark, Sophia sat on the cold flagged floor and waited. What seemed like hours later, a key turned in the lock, the door opened, and she was dragged out. Forced through the kitchen quarters and out of the kitchen door, she blinked as she stepped out into the fading sunlight. She reckoned it was now late afternoon and several hours since she'd first set off with Jenson. Would she have been missed yet?

'This way.' Jenson prodded her back, so she followed Dobbs through a forlorn kitchen garden and out of a narrow, squeaking gate set in the wall at the end. This in turn opened on to an overgrown path that, as far as she could tell, led down to the coast.

Twenty minutes later, after much slipping and sliding, she found herself on the sand of a sheltered cove, where a manned rowing boat was beached up on the shore. Her heart sank as she took in the scene. There was no-one in sight on the surrounding cliffs, no-one to whom she could signal her distress. Jenson shoved her in the back again, causing her to stumble.

'Get a move on, or we'll miss the tide.' Jenson's voice was brusque. An officer's voice, used to giving commands. 'This is where I leave you. Dobbs, you know what to do.'

'If you're sure, sir.'

'I am. Not too hard now, just enough to be convincing.'

Sophia watched in growing disbelief as Dobbs pulled back his arm and punched his fist into Jenson's face. Jenson flew backwards and landed with a thud in the sand. What on earth was happening? Had Dobbs decided to help her? Her heart raced. Perhaps matters were not as black as she'd thought.

'Oh, thank you, Dobbs. Please untie me.'

Dobbs, rubbing his fist, turned and gave her a smile. It was not a friendly smile.

'Get in the boat,' he rasped.

Her hopes plummeted. She didn't quite understand what had happened, but she did know her situation hadn't changed.

'You all right, sir?' Dobbs spoke to Jenson, who was now seated on the damp sand, holding his nose, from which a stream of crimson flowed.

'That should do it.' He gave a chuckle. 'It certainly feels convincing. Good man. I'll see you later.'

Sophia watched open-mouthed as Jenson stood up, picked up his hat, wiped the sand from his breeches, and sauntered back to the path leading up to the house. The devil! She'd see him pay for his treachery, she promised herself. But before she could think or do anything further, she was flung over Dobbs' shoulder and set down in the boat. A stale-smelling piece of linen was tied round her mouth, making any protest impossible. There were two sailors already in the boat, and the one who'd gagged her forced her down until she was lying on the bottom. It was damp and uncomfortable. A piece of canvas was thrown on top of her, telling her that wherever they were bound, it was likely that they would be in sight of the shore. A flicker of hope sparked in her breast.

The craft suddenly tipped, and she knew Dobbs was aboard. As the boat forced its way through the swell, the rocking and swaying made her feel sick and she almost panicked. If they overturned, there would be no hope for her. She was tied up, and even if she hadn't been, she couldn't swim. Screwing her eyes tight, she tried to forget where she was, praying that an opportunity to escape would arise when she reached her destination.

Chapter 15



TRY AS HE MIGHT, Phil found it impossible to loosen his bonds.

‘It’s no good, Ashdown. They won’t budge.’

‘Right. Are your legs tied to anything else? I am strapped to a barrel, but if you can move, we might just stand a chance. My guess is we’re on the orlop deck, so we’ve a way to go to reach topside.’

Phil ceased struggling with his bonds and instead rolled away from the cramped space against the hull where they’d placed him. His eyes were becoming accustomed to the gloom, and he could now make out that they were in a small storeroom in which barrels and sacks were stacked. A faint scratching and scuttling told him that the only other occupants besides himself and Ashdown were vermin intent on finding food, not escape.

‘Where are you, Ashdown? All I can see are what look like bales and barrels.’

There was a stirring of the air to his left. ‘Here.’

‘Ah, I’ve got you.’ Phil shuffled to where Ashdown was seated on the floor, legs outstretched in front of him. Ashdown’s arms were stretched behind him around a barrel. He was still wearing his undress jacket.

‘Good man.’ Ashdown, for all his affected nonchalance, sounded pleased. ‘They didn’t search me quite so thoroughly; I have a knife strapped round my waist. Do you think somehow you can locate it?’

Phil chuckled. ‘I never expected to get so intimate with a gentleman, but I’ll give it a go.’ He took a deep breath. ‘Don’t take this the wrong way, Ashdown.’ Phil ducked his head and nudged his face against Ashdown’s lean stomach, fleetingly noting that a life at sea had given the lieutenant a physique to be envied by any land-dwelling Corinthian. Catching hold of Ashdown’s shirt with his teeth, he pulled it this way and that. At last it came loose from Ashdown’s breeches.

‘I’m almost enjoying this, Cullen. But do you think you can locate the knife without slobbering against my body?’

Phil jerked his head up. What with his pounding temples, exhaustion, and fear of imminent discovery, he was not in the mood for his companion’s flippant remarks.

‘Cut line, Lieutenant! Which side is it on?’

‘My left... It should be easy enough to slide it out of the sheath. It’s saved my life more than once.’

Phil grunted and resumed his search. Success! His mouth met cold metal. He raised his head and tried to get purchase on the handle with his teeth. The first

attempt was unsuccessful, and he slumped back to catch his breath.

‘What’s the matter?’ Ashdown sounded tetchy.

‘Give me a minute. When was the last time you bathed, Ashdown?’ He decided two could play at Ashdown’s game.

‘Hmmpf.’

Another try, another failure. Until... Phil gave a grunt of satisfaction as the knife finally slid out of its sheath. Clamping it between his teeth, and terrified of dropping it in case it rolled away in the darkness, he manoeuvred round and positioned himself to commence sawing at Ashdown’s bonds. This was easier said than done. Whose idea was it? thought Phil, as he tried to position himself. Ashdown had made it sound a simple matter. Struggling to get his head and the knife at the correct angle to slice through the hemp, Phil misjudged, and the blade sliced through the flesh of Ashdown’s arm. Phil winced at Ashdown’s hissed outburst.

‘For God’s sake, be careful, you fool. Are you intent on my bleeding to death?’

The knife still clamped between his teeth, Phil was unable to respond with more than a grunt. With sweat beading on his forehead, he edged back towards the rope. Brow creased in concentration, Phil moved the knife slowly backwards and forwards, sensing the strands of twine breaking under the blade’s onslaught. This is going to work, he told himself. Carefully does it. Something brushed against his knee, and Phil’s head shot up. The knife slipped out of his mouth, landing with a clatter on the wooden planks.

‘Damn rats!’

Voices could be heard on the deck above.

‘Hell,’ hissed Ashdown. ‘Get back! Sounds like someone’s coming.’

There had to be some way to salvage the situation. Rolling onto his stomach, Phil nudged the knife, which luckily had not gone far, under Ashdown’s outstretched legs, before rolling back across the deck to the corner where he’d been dumped. The voices were getting louder as the footsteps got closer. Heart pounding in his chest, he tried to remember exactly where he’d been placed. At the sound of the key turning in the lock, he froze into position and closed his eyes, praying that it would not be noticed that he’d moved. The door opened, throwing a shaft of light across his prison. More footsteps, then a thud. Ashdown yelled.

The bastards had struck him.

Phil squeezed his eyes tight and braced himself for the kick he knew was coming his way. It caught him in the small of his back. Jaw clamped, he suppressed his groan, knowing that escape depended on their captors believing he was still out cold. There was some muttering in French, then the door closed again, leaving them in darkness once more. Phil let out the groan he’d been holding in.

‘Are you still with me, Ashdown?’ he managed to gasp out finally.

‘Aye,’ came his companion’s response. He didn’t sound quite as jaunty as before. Phil heard the lieutenant take a few deep breaths. ‘Bastards kicked me in the gut... It winded me, that’s all,’ Ashdown growled. ‘They’ll be sorry...’

Phil, too, inwardly vowed that his captors would pay. They deserved it. Who but cowards would attack a man when he was trussed up or unconscious?

After waiting a few more tense minutes to ensure their captors had truly gone, Phil ventured back across the floor.

‘Try not to slice my hand off this time, Cullen.’

Phil smiled at his companion’s bravado. ‘Do my best, old chap. I’ll do my best.’



Thank goodness Ashdown kept his weapon sharp, thought Phil as the last strand gave way. By his reckoning, it had taken a good fifteen minutes to locate the knife and finish the job he’d started earlier. This time without drawing too much blood. His jaw was aching with the effort. At last, the rope fell free, and Ashdown pulled his arms together, rubbing them vigorously to bring the feeling back.

‘Thank God. That’s better. Good job, Cullen. Here, shove the knife to me.’

Ashdown made short work of the remaining ties round his ankles, then set to releasing Phil. They both stood up cautiously, careful not to bang their heads against the low beams. Phil rubbed his back where he’d been kicked. The man who’d inflicted it must be related to a mule, he decided. Now, if only he could find something to use as a weapon. He didn’t want to have to rely entirely on his new-found ally, and he wasn’t going down without a fight. He crouched and began to search with his fingers around the barrels and stacked bales. More than once, his fingers met something warm that scuttled away at his touch. Quelling his revulsion, he continued until finally his persistence was rewarded when his fingers touched something cold and metallic. A crowbar. Grinning to himself, he pulled it towards him before picking it up and weighing it in his hands. *That should do nicely.* He moved to where Ashdown was standing, his ear close to the door.

‘Sounds like they’ve all gone up top to lend a hand. Something big and heavy being brought aboard.’ Ashdown straightened up and started to feel in his pockets. ‘I could do with something to pick this lock.’

‘Will this do?’ Phil grinned and pushed him aside.

It didn’t take long. With only a few creaks and groans, the door gave way under Phil’s strategic thrusts with the crowbar, the sound of the splintering wood now masked by the loud noises coming from the upper decks. Freedom beckoned.

‘We need to get on deck and find a way off. Ashdown, you’ve more experience of the layout of a ship. Lead the way.’

‘Wait.’ Ashdown’s voice halted Phil’s move through the doorway. ‘Take your boots off.’

Phil frowned. 'Why?'

'If we have to swim for it, they will impede you... You can swim, can't you?'

'Of course... I thought it was sailors who couldn't swim.'

Phil couldn't resist his sly dig. It didn't appear to have any effect. He knew Ashdown was grinning as he set down the crowbar and reluctantly started to pull off his boots.

'You're right. Most crew don't bother to learn. Think if they are going to drown, it might as well happen quickly. A view I don't subscribe to.' Ashdown chuckled. 'Good job I'm wearing shoes. I wouldn't want to lose a nice pair of boots like those. Hoby's, if I'm not mistaken?'

Phil shot him a venomous glance before giving his boots a pat. He was reluctant to part with them, but Ashdown was correct – they would impede things if he needed to swim for it, and they'd be ruined in any case.

The two men made their way along the companionway, halting at the sound of voices coming from one of the upper decks. The voices were speaking French, a language Phil understood.

'This is the last of it. Get it stowed quickly, lads. We'll be casting off as soon as we get the word.'

'Aye, sir.'

'We are lying low in the water. Some sharp-eyed devil might notice and wonder, so we will need to move swiftly. As soon as we are safely out to sea, we're to throw the unwanted cargo overboard.'

Phil guessed he and Ashdown were the unwanted cargo. But if their luck held, they would be off the ship well before it left the safety of the harbour. The mention of lying low also struck a chord. Hadn't Davey mentioned something to him? The thought fled his mind as Ashdown nudged him, and the two men remained silent as the sound of something large and heavy being manhandled across the upper deck echoed through the planks above their heads. Phil jerked his head upwards, a signal to Ashdown. Satisfied that the crew were fully occupied with their task, they started to make their way to the upper deck.

The stars were twinkling as Phil poked his head out of the hatch. He checked to make sure that no crew were about before scuttling over to where Ashdown was hunched down behind some coops stacked on the aft deck. The sound of gentle clucking gave convenient cover to the men's whispers.

'It's as I thought,' hissed Ashdown. 'Whatever is coming aboard is being brought from the Flushing side. The customs over at Falmouth cannot see. And I recognise this as the sloop flying the quarantine flag. Very clever.'

That was it! Phil remembered the conversation about the mysterious ship and hoped it was under observation by the authorities. Was it possible that the cargo being put on board was the consignment of gold bullion that they'd been told to look out for? That would account for it lying low in the water. All they needed

now was Ruth Newbody. If she was on board, that would tie everything up nicely.

Ashdown sidled over to the side and peered into the water below. He signalled for Phil to join him, then held up his hand in warning before scuttling back.

‘Thought we could get off, but a small boat is drawing up. Let’s wait and see who it is. It would be altogether too good if it turns out to be customs men.’

Alas, it was not the customs men. Phil watched as two crewmen hastened to sling a rope ladder to whoever had come alongside. His jaw clenched in anticipation as Dobbs’ head appeared over the rail. Ruth Newbody mustn’t be far away. Phil’s eyes narrowed as he spied the bundle slung over Dobbs’ shoulder. Anticipation turned to horror as Dobbs’ burden was taken from him and set down on the deck. It was Sophia!

Phil growled and started to move forward.

Ashdown clamped a hand over Phil’s mouth and tugged him back.

‘This changes things,’ Phil hissed. ‘I’ll stay here. You get help.’ There was no way that he was leaving the ship without her.

‘Are you sure? If they find you, they might not wait before killing you.’

‘I don’t care. I’m not leaving her. I’ve pledged to keep her safe and I will, or I’ll die in the attempt.’

‘As you will.’ Ashdown tipped his head in acknowledgement. ‘I’ll see you... and Miss Turner too. Soon, I hope.’

‘You will, on my life.’

Ashdown slipped aft and went silently over the side. Only Phil was aware of the muted splash as his unexpected ally started his long swim to shore.

Phil crept back into his hiding place behind the coops and watched as Sophia was led below deck. He’d give it a while before following, but he’d get her off this ship if it was the last thing he did.



The journey in the small craft seemed to take forever. To take her mind off the prospect of drowning, Sophia concentrated her thoughts on Phil. Would he forget her once she’d disappeared from his life? But at least it would mean she wouldn’t have to jilt him, she reminded herself. Ending an engagement always had repercussions for both parties. Her prospects of finding a husband would be dashed, for who would believe a girl with her background would turn down the opportunity of marrying so well? And despite his assurances to the contrary, he would be tainted by scandal too. Would sticklers for propriety permit their daughter to marry a man who had intended to marry a nobody?

How her opinion of him had undergone a transformation in recent days. Though she blushed to admit it, she did find him attractive in every way. Now she understood his character better, she’d seen how she’d misjudged him. His arrogance had dissolved as he’d tried to find a solution to her problems. He’d not

been put off by her own impetuous behaviour but had persisted in his attempts to set matters right for her. He'd been kind, and he'd pledged to care for her. And there'd been *that kiss*. It was scorched on her mind. She blinked away a tear. Perhaps it was just as well that they would not see each other again. She couldn't imagine being near him and not wanting to repeat it.

It was then that the boat bumped up against something solid, and she realised that they'd reached their destination. The canvas was lifted off, and after some terrifying pitching and rolling, Sophia was again hoisted over Dobbs' shoulders so that he could get her aboard the larger vessel. Its sides loomed above her head, and her heart hammered in her chest as Dobbs started to climb the rope ladder. Beneath them, the waves splashed against the hull. Frozen with fear, she prayed he would not drop her. At last, other arms reached out, and she was taken on board and shoved down onto the deck. She'd barely caught her breath when Dobbs clambered over the side and hauled her back to her feet, snarling, 'This way.'

Below deck, she was taken into what she guessed was the captain's cabin. Panelled in wood, there was a bed built into one side, with cupboards and shelves all neatly fitted. A lamp illuminated a desk, on which lay a map and compasses. Through the window, pinpoints of light from a nearby coastline could be seen. Sophia's heart beat faster. With luck, the vessel was moored somewhere on the Carrick Roads. There was still a chance that she could signal for help and someone might see.

'I don't know what you're thinking, but if it's about escaping, I assure you there is no chance of that. Not this time.' Mrs Newbody's familiar husky drawl echoed across the cabin. 'Untie her, Dobbs, and leave her to me. Go back on deck and make sure our cargo is being safely stowed away. They started bringing it aboard as soon as the light began to fade.'

An icy calm settled over Sophia as she faced the woman who'd ruined her life. Ruth Newbody was no longer dressed in her usual finery. Her face was devoid of its paint and powder. With a man's jacket draped over her shoulders and a white linen shirt tucked into close-fitting breeches, she looked as if she'd just stepped off the stage at Drury Lane.

Sophia flinched as the gag was torn from her mouth, then Dobbs removed the cord from her wrists. She rolled her shoulders in an effort to get some feeling back into muscles that ached from her time trussed up in the bottom of the boat.

'What do you want with me?' Sophia spat the words out as she watched Ruth fill two glasses from a decanter.

'Sit down, girl, and I will tell you.'

Quelling her rising anger, for she'd had enough of being treated as a pawn in somebody else's game, Sophia sat down and waited to hear what Ruth Newbody had to say.

Chapter 16



SOPHIA GRATEFULLY SIPPED THE brandy that Ruth Newbody poured for her. It warmed her insides, thawing the cold that had gripped her muscles during the rough and uncomfortable journey from the shore to the ship. She knew it wasn't drugged, as she'd observed Ruth's every action, and Ruth, now facing her across the desk, was drinking freely from her own glass. In the candlelight, the harsh planes of Ruth's face relaxed, giving the impression that she was pleased about something.

'Well, a good day's work, I think. Nearly everything is on board, and we are to set sail as soon as the wind and the tide are right.' Glittering eyes were turned on Sophia, reminding her of a cat. A cat who would quickly reveal her claws if she was upset. 'I even have you back, my dear. Thanks to some very quick thinking by my son.' Ruth was almost purring now. If only she were as easy to deal with as a cat, thought Sophia. What wouldn't she do to have a large mastiff to see this evil feline off.

Ruth's words suddenly registered. 'Your son? Lieutenant Jenson? An officer in the Royal Navy?' Sophia felt sure her mouth had dropped open.

'Don't look so shocked, my dear.' Ruth smirked. 'Of course the dear lieutenant is my son. So like his father.'

'But how...?'

'How? The usual way.' Ruth laughed a dirty laugh and winked. 'Ah, that's not what you meant, is it?'

Sophia felt sure she was missing something. Something coarse to which Ruth was alluding. Still chuckling at her own jest, Ruth continued. 'It was easy. My business interests paid for the best of educations. My connections to some of the highest in the land ensured my son was able to attend the right establishments where he mingled with their sons...' She paused for effect. 'And learned to despise them, as do I.'

Sophia took another fortifying sip of brandy, her mind racing. Perhaps if she encouraged Ruth to reveal all, she would have enough information to foil any further plans. Then the sickening reality of her situation intruded. She was a prisoner, far from shore on a ship that was about to sail. Ruth was only disclosing her plans because it did not matter if she knew. The drink caught in her throat and she choked.

Ruth sniggered. 'You're not accustomed to the finest of French brandies, are you? That will change... Providing you do as I tell you.'

‘W-w-what do you mean?’ Sophia glared at Ruth. ‘What exactly is your interest in me?’ If she was going to be abducted, she had a right to know the reasons. ‘I was leading a quiet life with reasonable prospects until you gulled me into going with you.’ She didn’t bother to disguise the venom she felt towards her captor. What was the point?

There was another screech of laughter. ‘Reasonable prospects!’ Ruth’s hand slapped down on the table, sending a shock through Sophia’s body. ‘Lordy, you were buried alive in that little Oxfordshire village. I was giving you the opportunity you deserved.’

Anger turned to confusion. ‘I don’t understand. How did you know about me?’ Nothing Ruth was saying made any sense.

Ruth twirled her glass, checking the contents. ‘Surely you wondered about your parentage? About who was paying for your upkeep?’

The blood drained from Sophia’s face. Dear Lord, was she the daughter of this awful woman? The thought made her want to retch.

‘You’ve gone quite pale, Sophia dear.’ Ruth’s lips curled in an odd smile as she poured more brandy into her glass. She offered some to Sophia, who waved her hand away. ‘No, I am not your mother, else you would have stayed with me.’ The smile on Ruth’s face faded. ‘I made the mistake of listening to my mealy-mouthed sister. Phoebe insisted you’d be better off with her. All because she didn’t approve of my way of life. I should’ve followed my instincts.’

Sophia’s confusion grew. Phoebe was Mrs Archer’s name... Was the woman who’d never shown her any affection her real mother? But why had she insisted on looking after a child for whom she had no love? None of it made any sense.

‘Phoebe Archer is my mother? But why...? Is that why she—’

‘No!’ Ruth’s fist slammed on the table again, making the compasses jump. ‘I told her that you should be told the truth, but she wouldn’t have it. The truth is that you are my sister Sophy’s child. She died giving birth to you.’

Ruth’s words reverberated in Sophia’s ears. For a moment, she couldn’t breathe... Couldn’t move. Her mother was dead. Her mother was dead. It was something she’d always known, deep down inside. Why else would she have been abandoned and made to live with a woman who didn’t care for her? Her mind started to work again. Ruth had the answers to questions she’d always wanted to ask.

‘What was she like?’ She needed to know something – anything – about her mother.

Ruth’s face took on an expression that Sophia had never seen before.

‘She was a darling. Quick and clever, generous and unselfish. Everybody loved her. She never saw the bad in people.’ Ruth’s gaze took on a faraway look. ‘Father was strict, so I saw it as my role to protect her, especially when Mama died. If she accidentally broke anything or did something wrong – petty things, I mean, that a

normal loving father would forgive – I would take the blame to save her from a beating.’ Ruth snorted, a sneer on her face. ‘Phoebe loved her too but never really understood why she ran away. I don’t think she truly forgave her. Perhaps that is why she treated you as she did. She only kept you for the money I sent.’ Ruth’s eyes misted over as she lapsed into silence, staring into her half-empty glass.

Sophia swallowed hard. Her mother had not been some awful demon, unloving and careless of her child. She’d been loved.

‘What about my father?’ she whispered. Had she got him wrong too?

‘Him?’ Ruth lifted her eyes from her glass and shook her head. ‘I never met him, but I know he loved her. Why else would he have married her, penniless as she was?’ She took a swig from her glass. ‘He was dead of a fever before you were born. A second son from a family who disowned him when he married my little sister.’ Sophia didn’t need to see Ruth’s face to know there was a sneer on it. ‘A vicar’s daughter was not good enough for a viscount’s son.’ Her voice had become a snarl.

‘Pardon?’ Sophia didn’t know which was more shocking – the fact that she was related to a viscount or the fact that Ruth Newbody was a vicar’s daughter.

‘Yes, Sophy turned up at Phoebe’s shortly before she gave birth to you. That was when Phoebe was living in the Midlands. Sophy said her husband’s family had disowned them all, so she had nowhere else to go. Phoebe agreed to take her in. She thought two widows would be able to earn enough between them to keep a child. Well, you can guess the rest.’ Ruth sighed. ‘Phoebe was left on her own with you. She contacted me... Up to then she’d refused to speak to me, but now she was desperate. I suggested that she move nearer to London so that I could provide for you both, but she insisted on remaining in the country. So... I bought the house in Crawley.’

Sophia tried to disguise her shock at the news that all her life she’d unknowingly been supported by the proceeds of vice. Inside, she was numb. Her whole life had been based on a lie of respectability, when in fact... She forced the thought out of her mind, concentrating instead on what Ruth was now saying.

‘Crawley wasn’t too far from London, but even so, Phoebe didn’t want me to visit.’ There was bitterness in Ruth’s voice. She picked up her glass and drained it. ‘Of course, Phoebe didn’t approve of your parents’ marriage... Had I understood how she meant to treat you...’ Ruth shrugged and poured herself another generous measure. ‘Well, never mind.’ There was a hint of regret in her voice now. ‘What’s done is done.’ She looked straight at Sophia. ‘I always wanted a little girl. I would’ve given you a loving home... Set you up in your own business.’

Sophia inwardly recoiled. Ruth Newbody had contemplated making her a bawd? Ruth seemed not to notice Sophia’s frozen features, or the disgust in her eyes.

‘Yes, I’d planned for you to run the establishment in St James’s, while I opened

up new possibilities further afield.'

'What about your son – Lieutenant Jenson? Would he not have resented the fact that you intended me to take over?' How she kept her voice steady, Sophia didn't know.

There was a husky chuckle. 'Not at all. You would've run it, and he would have owned a share. He could not be seen to have connections of that sort and continue with his navy career. I have plans for my son. What better way to victory for France than by having someone working on the inside?'

A mixture of shock, anger, and – shame to say it – curiosity welled in Sophia's breast. What event had been the catalyst for this woman's life of vice and treachery? Had someone compelled her to enter the life of the demi-monde? Why was she so filled with hate against her own country?

'Why did you start on this path? As your... niece' – she almost choked on the word – 'I think I have a right to know... to understand.'

Ruth inclined her head. 'I suppose you deserve an explanation.' Her hooded eyes held a faraway expression. 'Where to begin?'

'At the beginning?' Sophia was growing more confident. If she could understand what motivated this woman, perhaps there was a chance of persuading her to do the right thing. This was a woman, after all, who had loved and protected her little sister and paid for her niece to have a decent life.

'Let me see...' Ruth's eyes lifted and gazed out at the twinkling lights on the shore. 'We were three sisters. Phoebe was the oldest, I was next, and youngest was your mother, little Sophy. She was a happy, beautiful child. It was no wonder she took the fancy of a viscount's son. They ran away and married, and before long she was expecting you. By this time, I too had run away from home.' She leaned forward and fixed her dark eyes on Sophia's face. 'Our father was very strict, you see, and I was determined to have a different life to that of a simple country wife like Phoebe.'

'Mrs Archer?'

Ruth nodded, and the sneer made a reappearance. 'That's right. She married a local man – pious and unbending just like my father.' She gave a scornful laugh. 'No wonder she is such an unfeeling woman... All emotion has been drained out of her. When she became a widow, I wrote offering her a place with me in London. I was doing quite well by then.' Ruth's lip curled upwards. 'Yes, very well indeed. She, however, turned me down, the sanctimonious bitch... But she came crawling back eventually.'

'What were you doing? Had you married?' Sophia couldn't conceive of a woman doing well for herself without the help of a husband. It wasn't possible, was it?

'Marriage was not for me. The man who seduced me, a wealthy lord, abandoned me as soon as I told him I was with child. I vowed then I would get

my revenge.'

The chill in Ruth's voice made the hairs on the back of Sophia's neck stand on end.

'What did you do?' she asked.

The reply was terse and matter of fact. 'What any female with sense in those circumstances would do, of course. I decided to sell the one thing I had that was of value: my body.' The fingers of Ruth's hand ran sensuously down her bodice. 'I changed my name, pretending I was a widow and joined a mantua-maker, Mrs Davies, for I was good with a needle.' Ruth winked. 'But the main business of the house was pleasing the gentlemen who called there. I was a quick and eager pupil and saw there was an opportunity to make money. Mrs Davies agreed to keep me on when I began to show, for I was good with the accounts and had ideas to improve things.' Ruth's cheeks began to glow as she continued with her story. It seemed to Sophia that Ruth was enjoying the retelling of her past glories. 'Before long, all pretence at sewing was abandoned. We moved to better premises, nearer to St James's and the gentlemen's clubs. I was then in a position to put my plan into action.'

Sophia swallowed hard. 'What do you mean?'

'Why, I took over the business entirely. Mrs Davies was glad to retire to the country. I had improved her coffers sufficiently for her to live comfortably. I gained a reputation for supplying the gentlemen with what they wanted, whatever it might be. Then, of course, these gentlemen with their secret vices relied on me to keep their secrets... But there is always a price to be paid for my silence.'

Sophia understood at once. 'Blackmail?'

Ruth's head shot up, and she sent Sophia a glare that set her heart pounding.

'Be careful, my dear.' Her tone was silky, but the threat was unmistakeable. 'That is an ugly word. I did what I did to survive, to ensure that the son I love more than anything had the life he deserved and that you had some sort of life too, don't forget.' She slammed her glass down on the table, causing Sophia to jump. 'These so-called gentlemen are all alike. They care for nothing but their own pleasure. It will be a happy day when Napoleon invades and they are all thrown out of their comfortable homes.'

Sophia was horrified. It was one thing catering to perverse tastes and indulging in blackmail – but treason? The stories she'd heard about the turmoil and senseless killings in the name of liberty and fraternity sickened her. Why did Ruth wish to inflict that on her own countrymen?

Her puzzlement must have shown on her face, for Ruth started speaking again. 'I see you do not understand my allegiance to the French cause. I will explain. The only man who ever cared for me is French. He believed in me, encouraged me in my endeavours. He told me that life for females in France is much better. They are not looked on as chattels or men's playthings. When Napoleon rules England,

things here will change for women. We will be equal to men.'

Sophia masked her disbelief. From her scanty knowledge of the situation in France, she knew murder and killings were an everyday occurrence. She'd heard nothing about any improvements in the situation of females. Surely if that were true, every woman in Christendom would be fleeing to France? Some years ago, a woman called Wollstonecraft had written about equality and women's rights, but she had been mocked and made a laughing stock. No, Sophia was certain that whoever had convinced Ruth Newbody that France was some sort of female paradise was every bit as devious and cunning as Ruth herself.

'Who is this gentleman?' she asked, curious about the identity of the one man whom Ruth seemed to respect.

'Dubois. Gervase Dubois. He is the reason I work for Napoleon... He treats me as an equal. I run his network of agents. He has entrusted me with shipping the gold we have amassed to France. It will fill Napoleon's war coffers and ensure me a place in the new government when the time comes.'

Sophia couldn't help herself. 'I don't believe you. A woman will never be permitted to be part of the government.'

'Silence! Enough of your insolence.' Ruth's face contorted with anger. 'Things will change once all these evil aristocrats and gentlemen with too much money and too little sense are disposed of. They only care for themselves, with no regard for the gentler sex apart from the obvious.'

Sophia knew this wasn't true. 'Not all gentlemen are bad. Admiral Pridham and his wife have given me a home. He has been like a father to me.'

Ruth flicked her hand in a dismissive gesture. 'So? Does not the great admiral catch you unawares from time to time? Does he not slyly put his arms around you when Mrs Admiral is not looking?'

'No! No! Admiral Pridham is not like that.'

Ruth rolled her eyes. 'Not yet, perhaps... But given time.'

'You're wrong. And Mr Cullen, too, is kind. He helped me to get away...'
Sophia faltered.

Ruth's eyes sparkled with interest. 'Mr Cullen, eh? So he was the one. It's lucky I have him aboard. I can repay him.'

He was on board! Hope sprang up in Sophia's breast only to come crashing down seconds later. What state was he in? He surely wasn't on board voluntarily. And the malevolent glint in her aunt's eye did not reassure.

'What are you going to do to him?'

'I'd intended to have him pitched overboard, but it seems to me he may be more valuable alive.' She cast Sophia a calculating look. 'You can guarantee his life by agreeing to my plan.'

Sophia's pulse quickened. 'What plan?'

'I will arrange for you to be set up in your own establishment in London. Dobbs

knows where my funds are kept, and I have other contacts in the city who report back to me. Providing I have evidence from them that you are continuing my role and obtaining information from the fools who patronise your house, I will ensure this Cullen chap lives.' Ruth grinned as she stretched back into her chair.

Sophia's mind raced. Perhaps if she agreed to Ruth's plan, it would give her a chance to see him and somehow...

A sudden commotion on deck caused both women to start. Pistol shots and men's screams could be heard. Ruth leapt from her seat. 'Don't move from here if you know what's good for you. I'm going up to see what those fools are doing.' Cursing under her breath, she pulled a pistol out of the drawer, checking and priming it as she stalked towards the door. 'Hell and damnation! I warned them to be quick, else we'd attract attention... Should've set sail by now.' Directing a last warning glare at Sophia, Ruth stormed out of the cabin, slamming the door behind her.

Sophia leapt to her feet, her mind in a quandary. Would it be safer to remain in the cabin, or should she use the commotion to make a bid for freedom? Pulse racing at her audacity, she decided she wasn't going to wait passively for her fate. She edged towards the door, listening to the sound of fighting and explosions coming from the deck above. Terrified that any second someone would burst in and shoot her before asking questions – she was on a French vessel and in the company of a traitor, after all – she cracked open the door. The well-oiled hinges didn't make a sound. She peeked out. Darkness shrouded the companionway. It looked safe enough, and from the noise, all the action was still taking place on the upper deck. This might be her only chance. She stepped out of the cabin... and walked straight into a solid mass. A hand clamped over her mouth, stifling her cry of alarm.

Chapter 17



PHIL MADE HIS SILENT way below as soon as he saw Dobbs return to the top deck to join the rest of the crew. They were still busy hauling stuff aboard. He hoped Sophia had been taken to more salubrious quarters than his own prison in the hold. With luck, he'd be able to locate her without too much trouble. Inching his way along the dimly lit companionway, he glimpsed a sliver of light coming from under a door at one end. Muscles tensed, he tiptoed nearer, the crowbar clutched in his hand. If anyone tried to take him, they would get a sore head at the very least for their pains.

Putting his ear to the door, he was rewarded by the sound of Ruth Newbody's distinctive voice. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. How he loathed that woman. His heart skipped a beat as Sophia's clear tones reached him. He'd found her but had no idea what was taking place on the other side of the door. He paused, undecided, every muscle tense. Should he burst in now or wait? Caution won. If Ruth Newbody had a pistol trained on Sophia, it could all be over for her before he'd even breached the threshold.

He heard Sophia asking Ruth if she'd been married. Why did she need to know that? But at least there was no sign of tremor in her speech. A smile formed on his lips. The clever minx. If anyone could get herself out of a predicament, Sophia could – he'd never met a more resourceful female. It sounded as if she was playing for time. His grip on the crowbar tightened, but he remained where he was. Better to wait a while and listen.

Ruth seemed to be recounting her life story. He couldn't make out all her words, just snatches here and there. His ears pricked up as his name was spoken. 'Mr Cullen, too, is kind. He helped me to get away...' It was Sophia. Her voice faded as Ruth interrupted. Something about repaying him. His jaw clenched. He'd see about repayment! If anybody was going to be repaid for their deeds, it was going to be Ruth Newbody. Debating whether now was the time to intervene, he decided to give it a little longer. The conversation on the other side of the door was getting more one-sided – more Ruth and not much from Sophia. Convinced that the two females were the only occupants of the cabin, as another party would have made themselves known by now, he forced himself to be patient.

He was about to make his move when the sound of shouting and pistols firing on the upper deck broke the near silence. He tensed, thinking it was too soon for Ashdown to have found help. Phil slid back into the shadows as the cabin door burst open and Ruth Newbody came striding out, a pistol in her hand. The door

slammed behind her. He watched as she made purposefully for the stairway to the upper deck. For a woman, she did not flinch from danger, he'd give her that, but that was where any admiration he had for her ended. She was ruthless – ironic given her name – and as evil as any man he'd encountered.

He waited until Ruth disappeared before stepping out. The noise above was getting louder, shouts and screams and the splashes of what perhaps were bodies landing in the water. His head swivelled back to the cabin as a narrow shaft of light appeared from the door. It opened wider, revealing Sophia's slender figure illuminated there. His heart missed a beat. She was unharmed. In the dark of the companionway, he was invisible, and he watched as Sophia stepped out of the cabin door. Not daring to make a sound in case she screamed and drew unwanted attention from those on deck, he waited until she was almost upon him before clamping his hand over her mouth. The expected struggle didn't happen. To his shock, she went limp. It was as if all the fight had gone out of her.

'Darling, it's me,' he whispered.

Her body straightened, and she lifted her chin until her frightened eyes met his.

'Phil... You came for me.'

He grasped her by the arm. 'Come, we must move swiftly. I'm not sure what's happening on deck, but I'm not letting you up there until it has quietened down. We'll stay below until it's clear.' He pulled her back along the companionway. A door swung open with the swaying of the ship. Inside, all was darkness. 'Quick. In here.' He dragged her into what seemed to be another cabin, pushing her behind him while he kept guard at the door.

There was a sharp tug on his sleeve. 'What's happening?' she hissed.

'I'm not sure. Something's going on... Whether it's an accident, a fight, or – heaven help us – rescue, it means we might be trapped here for a time.' He strained his ears. Whatever was taking place on the deck above, it wasn't over yet. There were thuds, pistol shots, and now the smell of gunpowder. A scream cut through the air. Phil hoped the voice belonged to Ruth Newbody.

His arm crept round Sophia's shoulders, and he pulled her close, stroking her hair. 'Whatever happens, I'll die before I let you come to any harm.' He meant it. He'd fight tooth and nail to keep her safe. Once he'd got her off the ship, he wasn't going to let her out of his sight. She nestled into his chest, and he bent his head, nuzzling into her hair, breathing in her scent. How could he have been so foolish as to think he never wanted to marry? He wanted to be this close to her forever.



Sophia pressed herself against Phil's body. She felt safe now he was near. For all his faults, Phil was a man she could depend on. With a jolt, she remembered their arrangement. If only their betrothal was real. She could imagine spending her life

with him and being happy, but that was never to be. He would certainly end it once he discovered exactly how closely she was connected to Ruth Newbody. Who would want to be associated by marriage to a traitor, a spy, and a brothel keeper?

She must have tensed, for his arms gripped her tighter. His lips caressed her hair. She sighed... If only this moment would go on forever. But that was impossible. Sophia returned to reality. The noise from above decks had ceased. It was time to discover what was going on and somehow persuade Ruth Newbody to let Phil go. She'd promise that woman anything to ensure his safety. Disentangling herself from his arms, she started for the door.

Phil pulled her back and held a finger to his lips. 'No. Stay here while I go up and try to find out how things stand.'

She shook her head. There was no way she was letting him get killed. If he emerged from the hatch, Ruth's men might fire first and ask questions later. 'I'll go. Ruth wants me alive.'

Phil's eyes narrowed. 'Don't be ridiculous. It's my place as your—'

She didn't let him finish. 'It's only a pretend betrothal, remember? I tell you, Ruth won't permit me to be killed.' Without waiting for his answer, Sophia slipped past him and was out of the door before he could stop her. Ignoring his curse, she didn't stop until she reached the bottom of the ladder. With a quick glance round, she saw he was following close behind. She started to climb, holding her breath in an effort to control her fear.

It was dark up on deck, but she could discern movement. A group of men were huddled together at one side of the quarterdeck, held at bay by two sailors levelling pistols. Indistinct shouts were coming from the other open hatch. Sophia clambered higher until she was able to haul herself out of the hatchway. She stepped out onto the swaying deck and immediately discerned something solid lying across her path. Bending down for a closer look, by the light of the lantern swinging from the poop deck, she realised with a shock that it was a man's body. Holding her breath, she stepped around, doing her best to ignore the gaping hole in the man's chest and the staring, vacant eyes.

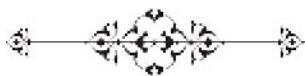
Two paces more and she halted, undecided on which way to proceed.

A voice boomed through the darkness. 'Ahoy there!' A familiar figure emerged through the gloom. Sophia sagged in relief, and Phil caught her just in time.

The remainder of that evening became a blur. Everything happened so fast. Sophia vaguely recalled being bundled up and conveyed in what she presumed was a naval cutter back to shore and a nearby inn. Somebody – she thought it was Phil – pressed a brandy on her. It occurred to her that she'd drunk so much brandy in the past few days that it was becoming quite a familiar taste. She stifled the giggle that threatened; it wouldn't do to become hysterical. The brandy burned her throat, but its warmth comforted her and put a stop to the uncontrollable trembling that coursed through her limbs. Then suddenly

Emmaline was there. She was being clasped in motherly arms and whisked upstairs to be tucked up in bed. Linen cool against her cheek and a soothing hand on her forehead were the final things she was aware of before sinking into an exhausted sleep.

Chapter 18



THE SUN WAS HIGH in the sky when Sophia awoke. She rolled out of bed and drew back the shutters, blinking at the light bouncing off the surface of the water in the harbour below. A pair of swans with their cygnets glided in an orderly line along the shoreline. In the distance, the pennants of the ships at anchor in the harbour fluttered in the breeze. Sophia lifted the sash, stuck her head out of the window, and inhaled the fresh, salty air. It felt good to be alive. There'd been times the previous day when she'd not expected to live, never mind return to English soil.

For a second, the image of Ruth Newbody, pistol in hand, appeared before her eyes. A pang of terror shot through her. What had become of her aunt? In all the confusion of the previous night, she had not thought to ask. With luck, Ruth had been captured and her nefarious plans scuppered. Sophia screwed her eyes tight shut and told herself that Ruth, dead or imprisoned, couldn't hurt her any more. She opened her eyes to see the ships still bobbing on the water and took a breath. No, whatever had happened last night, Ruth was out of her life forever.

Sophia slammed the window back down, rushed through her ablutions, and raced downstairs. Hearing the admiral's unmistakeable tones, she followed her ears and entered the parlour she'd been taken to the night before.

Emmaline dropped her embroidery hoop onto the padded window seat and launched herself at Sophia.

'Come here, my dear. I was so worried about you yesterday. And when they brought you ashore last night... Well, you were as white as a sheet.'

Sophia was enveloped in a crush of silk, lace, and the scent of lavender as Emmaline took her in her arms.

'Now, now, my dear. Give the dear girl some room to breathe.' The admiral chuckled as he waited his turn to give her a fatherly hug. 'She looks well enough to me, and Mr Cullen told you how well she conducted herself. She doesn't need mollycoddling, I'm sure.'

Emmaline's grip loosened and she wiped her eyes. The admiral patted Sophia on the back. 'Yes, you're a brave little puss, indeed you are. A bit of backbone, just like my Emmy.'

Emmaline gave a snort and pulled a face at her husband. He winked at her and ambled back to the fireplace, fumbling for the pipe in his pocket as he went.

'Kindly put that pipe away, Admiral. The air in this room will become quite unpleasant.'

Sophia grinned. The admiral's flattery had not softened his wife sufficiently for her to permit him to smoke indoors.

Admiral Pridham rolled his eyes and removed his hand from his pocket. He grinned at Sophia. 'Well, as I was saying, your adventures don't seem to have done you too much harm, and thank goodness for that. Though we could have done with apprehending Mrs Newbody.'

Sophia froze in horror. 'Sh-she got away?' Would Ruth never be caught? The woman had more lives than a cat.

'I was told she went overboard before she could be taken. One of the militia swears he caught her in the shoulder with a ball, so she can't have got far. Pity it was confoundedly dark. Made it devilish difficult to make anything out.' The admiral glanced at Sophia's white face. 'Never mind about her. I'm sure she is dead.' A puzzled frown creased his brow. 'The woman's caused you too much trouble, and for what? I ask you. I just can't fathom it.'

Sophia inwardly winced. He would know soon enough... And then what? It was incumbent on her to tell them about her connection to Ruth Newbody. They'd not balked at her kidnapping by that awful woman, but would the fact of her familial relationship be a step too far? Well, she would soon find out.

Emmaline patted the seat next to her. 'Come and sit here, Sophia. After we've eaten, you can tell us a little more about what happened.' Sending her an arch look, she added, 'Your fiancé will be joining us shortly. Such a romantic story you will have to tell your grandchildren.'

Sophia gave a strained smile. Grandchildren? Who would marry her when her past and family connections were revealed? She was certain Mr Cullen wouldn't, and besides, theirs was only a pretend engagement.

One thing puzzled her. 'What happened last night, Admiral? How did you know Mr Cullen and I needed rescuing?' She had no idea how the naval authorities had learned of their predicament.

The admiral tapped the side of his nose. 'You can thank Lieutenant Ashdown for that.'

'Lieutenant Ashdown?' Sophia didn't understand at all. What had he to do with anything? He was the most unsettling gentleman she'd ever met, and it had been a relief when Phil had rescued her from his unwanted attentions.

The admiral nodded. 'Yes, Lieutenant Ashdown. Allow me to finish.'

Emmaline set a warning finger to her lips. One should never interrupt an admiral.

The admiral cleared his throat. 'Now, where was I? Ah, yes. There we were, running around looking everywhere for you after Lieutenant Jenson hobbled back to inform us of your abduction.' He shook his head. 'Poor chap. He must have put up quite a fight to protect you... Looked as if he'd been in a mill with Gentleman Jackson himself. Nose quite bent out of shape.'

It was with difficulty that Sophia stifled her immediate impulse to reveal Jenson's true role in the episode. One should never interrupt an admiral, she told herself, and returned her attention to the admiral's words.

'Then late last night, when we'd searched everywhere this side of the harbour,' he continued, 'who should turn up but Lieutenant Ashdown, looking very like a drowned rat.'

Sophia's mind raced. Jenson's ploy had obviously worked... But where did Lieutenant Ashdown come into things?

She must have been frowning, for Emmaline gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. 'Now, don't worry. Customs and the Royal Navy have everything under control. Apparently, the ship you were taken to had been under observation for some days.' She turned to her husband. 'Something about the quarantine flag, wasn't it, Admiral?'

'That's right... And the fact that she was quite high in the water when she was supposed to be carrying cargo.' He rubbed his chin. 'We knew once she started to lie lower that something was being brought aboard clandestinely. Turns out she was flying under false colours, not a British vessel at all. Must have got the idea from old Cochrane, don't you know?' He grinned to himself. 'Canny chap. Flew a Danish flag on his brig *Speedy* and told the Spanish navy who were trying to come alongside that he had plague on board. Worked like a charm. Full of tricks like that is Cochrane.' He leaned over to where his wife and Sophia sat and lowered his voice. 'Mind you, he's not the most popular of men... Made a lot of enemies in the Admiralty.'

'But I still don't understand.' Sophia, a trifle exasperated, attempted to bring the conversation back to the point.

'Ah, yes, where was I?' The admiral scratched his head. 'Yes, Ashdown turned up. He'd been sent on a fool's errand to a house in Flushing and was abducted from there and put on board with Mr Cullen. Seems the plan was to dispose of them both when they were at sea.'

'But why Ashdown? I still don't understand.' Goodness me, why would he not say?

Looking uncomfortable, the admiral's eyes refused to meet Sophia's. 'Well, err...'

Suddenly, it made sense. If Ruth Newbody was a spy, it stood to reason that there were British government agents also operating. Was Lieutenant Ashdown working for the government? Was Mr Cullen also an agent? And the admiral? Why else would Ruth Newbody take such drastic action?' Sophia swallowed. Was nobody who they seemed?

Dazed by the complexity of it all, she finally remembered her news.

'I must tell you about Lieutenant Jenson.'

The admiral's gaze sharpened. 'What about him?'

‘He is not who he says he is. He is Ruth Newbody’s son. He didn’t try to rescue me... It was all a fabrication.’

There was a gasp from Emmaline.

‘What?’ A pulse throbbed on the admiral’s forehead. ‘He *lied*?’ Sophia was certain he could be heard in the next county.

‘But he was so convincing,’ said Emmaline, shooting an anxious look at her husband. ‘What about his bruises?’

Sophia explained. ‘He got Dobbs, one of Ruth Newbody’s henchmen, to punch him. It was all done to persuade you he was telling the truth. Ruth wanted him to gain access to naval plans so that they could be passed on to the French.’

‘By God! I’ll be damned. Must put a stop to this now... His ship is about to set sail.’ The admiral charged out of the room, his calls for people to clear out of his way echoing round the inn yard.

Emmaline looked troubled. ‘But how do you know all this? Why did Mrs Newbody confide her plans to you?’

A pang of misery clutched at Sophia’s heart. Now was the time to confess. She took a deep breath.



Sophia hung her head in shame, unable to meet Emmaline’s eyes. After almost twenty minutes of stuttering out her story and watching Emmaline’s expression turn from disbelief to shock, then horror, she was ready to flee the room.

‘With your permission, I’ll go to my room,’ she said at last.

Emmaline nodded. Her normally cheerful voice was subdued. ‘Yes... I think I might retire for a while too. It’s all been a bit of a shock.’ With trembling hands, Emmaline started to gather up her needlework.

Sophia knew that this was surely the end of their friendship. A dull ache settled in her heart. From now on, she would be a pariah to all decent folk. Reaching her room, she decided to lie down for a few minutes before making a start on collecting her things. If only Emmaline would permit her to return to their home to collect her possessions before turning her out. Her few savings might get her back to Oxfordshire. Perhaps that innkeeper’s wife, Mrs Grover, might have a suitable position for her at her inn.



It was pitch dark when Sophia awoke. She rubbed her eyes and sat up, trying to get her bearings. Then it all came crashing back... Her confession to Emmaline... Emmaline’s silence. A cold fear clutched at her insides. Would she be allowed to collect her things?

Dragging herself off the bed, she found a candle on the nightstand, lit it, and

tried to straighten her hair. Satisfied it was in some semblance of order, she attempted to smooth down her skirts, which were now terribly creased. Her reflection in the mirror grimaced back at her. In her present state of dishevelment, she would make a good impression on no-one.

Taking a lungful of air, Sophia lifted her chin and straightened her shoulders.

I coped with Mrs Archer; I stood up to Ruth Newbody; I can face anybody. I don't need someone to care for me. I can manage on my own.

If only she believed her own words.

Closing the door behind her, she started down the stairs, the sound of her shoes echoing on the treads. Suddenly, the door to the parlour opened, casting a warm light over the flagged hallway.

'There you are,' a voice called. 'I thought you would sleep forever. I was just coming up to see if you wanted something to eat.'

At first, Sophia could only stare at Emmaline silhouetted in the parlour doorway.

She found her voice at last. 'Pardon? I... I...' she stammered, then stopped. What a fool she was to have misinterpreted Emmaline's feelings. What an addle-pated nincompoop indeed.

'Do hurry, my dear.' Emmaline steered her through the open door. 'Mr Cullen has been waiting impatiently these last few hours to see you. I've had to use all my powers of persuasion to get him to desist from sending for a doctor. He was insistent that it was more than tiredness causing you to keep to your room.'

Sophia stepped into the parlour and blinked. The room was ablaze with candles. The innkeeper would be rubbing his hands in glee.

'Here she is at last, everyone.'

At Emmaline's announcement, Sophia found herself the focus of all the room's occupants. There was Admiral Pridham, beaming from ear to ear; Lieutenant Ashdown, looking darkly intimidating but rather less predatory than she remembered; and Phil, whose beckoning smile and intense gaze sent shivers of excitement down her spine.

Lieutenant Ashdown came towards her and bowed. 'I owe you an apology, Miss Turner. I fear my overfamiliar behaviour the other day caused you some anxiety.' His eyes flicked to Phil, who was regarding him suspiciously. 'And Mr Cullen, too. But it was necessary, you see. I was playing a part in an effort to convince Jenson of my reprobate character.'

'It is forgotten, Lieutenant,' said Sophia, pleased that he was not the wolfish man he'd quite successfully portrayed. With his dark good looks, he'd have had no problem finding willing victims.

Admiral Pridham tutted and, taking her arm, led her to a seat at the table.

'Come and sit down. I'm sure you must be starving. You've had no rations since yesterday.'

With a smooth movement, Phil slid into the seat next to her.

‘Allow me,’ he murmured, pouring her a glass of wine. Her pulse fluttered as his hand brushed against her arm.

Lieutenant Ashdown pushed a dish of boiled fowl towards her. ‘I’m sure Miss Turner would prefer some food first.’

Phil glared at him, much to Ashdown’s amusement. Ashdown sent her a crooked smile. ‘Your fiancé is very proprietorial, Miss Turner.’

‘We’re not—’ she began, but before she could finish, Phil interrupted.

‘What Miss Turner was going to say is that we are not going to be betrothed for much longer.’

Sophia paled and turned to look at the man beside her. Was he going to do this in such a public way and in front of a near-stranger too? The admiral and Emmaline were both beaming at her, and Ashdown’s face held a knowing smile. She looked at Phil, hardly daring to breathe.

His eyes smouldered. ‘We won’t be betrothed for much longer because we intend to marry as soon as possible.’ He raised his glass. ‘A toast to my bride-to-be.’

Sophia sat mute, a smile pasted on to her face, barely hearing everyone’s cheers and congratulations. She knew Phil could be impulsive – his past behaviour had shown that – but to throw his future away by marrying her? She couldn’t let him do it. She strongly suspected that Emmaline had kept the knowledge of her shameful connection to Ruth Newbody a secret. Why else would he still be considering marriage? They needed to speak privately.

She leaned towards him and whispered urgently, ‘We do have a few more matters to discuss before we set the actual date.’

Infuriatingly, he just nodded and smiled. ‘Of course. You will need time to invite your friends to the ceremony... and, I daresay, have a few dresses made for our wedding trip.’

Her mouth tightened. This was impossible. Could he not sense her anxiety?

‘A toast to the happy couple!’ Lieutenant Ashdown raised his glass and winked at her across the table. Sophia blushed and forced a smile as the rest of the party clinked their glasses and wished her and Phil good health.

Hungry though she was, Sophia barely tasted the fare that was placed on her plate. There were dishes of mussels served with a cream sauce, boiled sole with oysters, roasted onions, dressed crabs, crispy deep-fried whitebait, plenty of prawns, and cauliflower and green beans in white sauce. But as far as Sophia was concerned, it might as well have been plain bread and cheese.

‘You are not eating much,’ Phil whispered in her ear. ‘Is something amiss?’

‘No... yes... no.’ The deep concern in his eyes completely set her off balance, causing her to make a mull of things again. Finally she got control of her tongue. ‘I need to talk to you.’

He nodded. 'Don't worry. I will arrange for us to be private. Mrs Pridham cannot object to us being alone for a few minutes, seeing as we are soon to be married.' He stood up and pushed his chair back. 'I'm taking Miss Turner – Sophia – outside for a moment. She feels the need for some fresh air.'

'Yes, it is a trifle stuffy in here.' Emmaline's eyes twinkled conspiratorially. 'A minute or two in the fresh sea air will do you good, Sophia. You are still looking a little fagged, despite your sleep this afternoon. I daresay it is all the recent excitement.'

Phil took Sophia's arm and led her out of the inn. She shivered, and it wasn't because of the cold sea air. Now was the time to give him the dreadful truth of her birth and family connections.

'You're cold. Wait there while I get you something. I'm sure Mrs Pridham will lend you a shawl.' Phil disappeared for a moment, then returned clutching Emmaline's *cashemire* shawl. He gently draped it round Sophia's shoulders. 'There you are. That should keep the chill out. Shall we walk down to the high street?'

Sophia nodded. Her stomach was churning. This was sure to be the last time they'd spend in each other's company. How she would miss his reassuring presence and his austere, stern features that could change in an instant into a devastating smile. Even when they were arguing, and he certainly had a way of provoking her temper, there was something about him that attracted her. Above all, he alone made her feel safe in a way that no-one else had ever done. After they parted, she would be on her own again.

She sighed. It had to be done. She couldn't deceive him. There'd been enough lies told in the past, for which she couldn't forgive herself. She was not going to compound her sins by omitting to tell the truth.

'When you were outside the cabin, did you hear anything of the conversation between myself and...?' She couldn't bring herself to say Ruth Newbody's name.

'Ruth Newbody?' Phil sounded puzzled. 'Yes, a little. I heard her blackmailing you.' He pulled her to a halt and placed a gentle finger under her chin, tipping her face upwards. Their eyes met. 'Would you really have done her bidding to keep me alive?' His husky tone sent prickles of excitement shooting through her body.

'Yes, of course—'

Her words were cut off as he pressed his lips against hers. All coherent thought fled, and she was lost in a maelstrom of emotion... longing... feeling. She savoured the pressure of his mouth on hers, wanting the moment to go on forever. His scent filled her nostrils as she tasted his lips. It was a kiss as overwhelming and all-consuming as the first one they'd shared.

He drew away first, breaking the connection between them. Reality returned. What on earth was she doing? She glanced round to assure herself there were no witnesses to her wanton behaviour and attempted to steady her breathing. He, too, seemed to be having problems. She heard him gasp. A moment later, he took

her arm through his and they resumed their walk as if nothing had happened.

‘I’m sorry. I couldn’t resist,’ he said, sounding the opposite of apologetic. Drawing a hand through his hair, he turned to give her a crooked smile. ‘I never thought I would inspire anyone to care so much for me that they would do something so against their nature just to keep me alive.’

Sophia frowned. ‘Why ever not?’ It was beyond her comprehension that no-one else cared for him.

Phil, looking thoughtful, suddenly nodded. ‘You’re quite correct, and I am wrong. My family do care about me. Uncle Ralph, he took on the responsibility of my estate as well as his own while I was gallivanting about in London.’

‘I wouldn’t call acting as an agent of the Crown gallivanting. That’s what you are, aren’t you?’ She wasn’t going to let him brush off his bravery that easily.

He chuckled and tapped the side of his nose. ‘My lips are sealed. As for gallivanting, I suppose not. But I’ll have to dispel your illusions about my being some sort of intrepid hero. I’m afraid that I led quite a steady life posing as a secretary. The truth is, I enjoyed pretending to be someone I’m not. I didn’t want to settle down to the humdrum life. It was exciting to feel I was doing my part to aid the war against Napoleon.’

They had reached a point in the road that gave a view over the harbour, so they paused to gaze across the inky water. The gentle lapping of the sea against the harbour wall was the only sound to be heard. Sophia thought about his words as she watched the faint pricks of light from the ships at anchor in the distance. He didn’t want to settle down. Here was the opportunity to tell him so that he could carry on with the exciting and – even though he denied it – clandestine life of adventure he craved. She removed her arm from his and took a few steps back so that she was facing him. He was still gazing out to sea, a thoughtful, faraway expression on his face. He seemed not to have noticed that she had stepped away from him.

‘What are you thinking about?’ she asked.

He jerked his head round and reached out to take her hand. ‘About what a fool I’ve been.’

A shaft of disappointment shot through her at his words. So he’d realised at last that marriage was not what he really needed or wanted. Her task would be easier.

‘You’re not a fool. I’m glad that you’ve come to your senses about marrying. You are meant for somebody better than me... Somebody more suitable.’

The pressure of his hands on hers increased. ‘What do you mean, “better”?’ He tried to pull her closer, but she resisted. She couldn’t afford to succumb and ruin what little dignity she had left. It was all she had... Once her links to a notorious French spy were known, her reputation would be in tatters. And so would his, if he persisted with their betrothal.

‘You didn’t hear all of Ruth Newbody’s words,’ she blurted out. ‘She is my

aunt.' Sophia tore her hands from his and turned towards the harbour wall, its rough stone the only thing stopping her from collapsing. She had a sudden overwhelming urge to sob, but with an iron will she kept it under control.

'Sophia.' He'd moved closer. She could feel the warmth of his body next to hers as he whispered her name. Hands possessively on her shoulders gently turned her around. She kept her head down, unable to meet his eyes... If she did, she would surely fall apart.

'Look at me, love.' His voice, husky with emotion, made her raise her eyes. He was staring at her with such intensity, it sent shivers down her spine. 'Mrs Pridham told me about your background. You have nothing to be ashamed of. You are not responsible for the actions of your aunt. What happened to her was all her own choice. You have had the hardest start in life, losing both your parents, yet you have not followed the path Ruth Newbody had in mind for you. You are strong. The Pridhams adore you. Your friends in Oxfordshire by all accounts think highly of you – Mrs Pridham told me that Mrs Simpson sent you the most glowing references.' He paused, his eyes boring into hers. 'I used to think I never should marry. My parents' arranged marriage was not a success, and I did not want to inflict that sort of misery on any children of mine.' He sighed. 'But I was mistaken in my belief. I am different from my father, and I can choose my own wife. Just as you are different from Ruth Newbody and her son. I believe we can shape our own futures, and if we meet someone with whom we feel a connection, we should act on it.' He cupped her face with his hands. 'Sophia, since I first met you, I haven't been able to get you out of my mind. Now I know you better, I have learned that I want to spend the rest of my life with you. No-one else will do.'

She couldn't believe it. 'But you want a life of adventure. You want excitement. You want to continue supporting the fight against Napoleon.'

'Shh.' He placed a finger over her lips. 'I can still assist in the fight against Napoleon by remaining down here in Cornwall and running my estate. The government needs agents in all parts of the country. None more so than here, where it is easy for people, money, and information to slip across the Channel. Besides, I will have more than enough excitement with a wife as headstrong and intelligent as you.' His finger stroked her cheek. 'No woman has ever stood up to me like you... I find I quite enjoy our sparring.'

Oh, how she was tempted by his words! How her heart thumped in her chest, sending her pulse racing. But caution still held her back. She had to be certain that there would be nothing to cause him regret in the future at being leg shackled to her. She decided to play her final card.

'I can't agree to marry you yet. I need to discover who my family are.'

'You know who they are: that wretch Newbody and the miserable besom of an aunt who brought you up. Who else do you need to know about?' His words

stung.

She swallowed hard. She had to stay strong. 'I want to know about my father's family. For all you know, there is madness there. Why else would they refuse to care for the legitimate offspring of their son?'

There was silence. Sophia watched as Phil's jaw worked up and down. The look of incomprehension faded from his face. 'Very well,' he said at last. 'However, I will assist you in making contact with your family. And I insist that we will remain, to all intents and purposes, an engaged couple. Once we see how the land lies, it may be you who decides I am not good husband material.' His eyes, hard and glittering, bore down into her own.

She gave him a bleak smile. 'Agreed.' Inwardly, she suspected that once the truth was discovered, he'd be relieved she'd given him one last chance to escape his commitment.

Chapter 19



THE ADMIRAL AND ASHDOWN were alone in the parlour by the time Phil and Sophia returned. Mrs Pridham had retired to her room. Sophia decided to go up and join her before retiring for the night herself. Phil watched her climb the stairs with a mixture of frustration and longing. Goodness, she was a headstrong, independent-minded female. But that was what attracted him to her. She knew her own mind. He needed someone who would stand up to him. He did not want some milk-and-water miss. And all this nonsense about not being good enough for him. What fustian! He'd locate her father's family and give them a piece of his mind for abandoning a child to the tender mercies of a pair of cold-hearted aunts. Both he and Sophia had suffered enough in their childhoods, and it was no reason to deny themselves future happiness. They would make a better life for themselves... and their children, if they were so blessed. Once this was sorted, he would march her to the nearest church. But only if she agreed. He didn't know what he would do if she didn't.

He stepped back into the smoke-filled parlour. The admiral had taken the occasion of his wife's absence to light up his pipe. Seated by the fire, he was contentedly listening to Ashdown describe a recent posting.

'Such a fine vessel. Rides easy at her anchors, carries her parts well, rolls and pitches easily... couldn't have picked a better ship myself. It's almost a pity to leave her.' Ashdown uncrossed his booted leg and stretched out a languid hand to his glass, swirling it gently before touching it to his lips.

'You're being transferred, Ashdown?' Phil helped himself to some Madeira and sat down on the settle near the fire. He needed some warmth after his peregrinations, and he prayed Sophia had not caught a chill.

Ashdown grinned at him from his seat. 'I'm leaving the navy for good.'

Phil's eyes widened. He'd thought Ashdown a navy man through and through. A snort came from the admiral, who was seated beside him.

'A sad loss. I hope you don't regret it, my boy. A few more years and I'm sure you'd make post captain.'

'I've been given other opportunities by the War Office.' A satisfied smile settled on Ashdown's face. 'Something that appeals more than living in cramped accommodation cheek by jowl with others and where I'm not casting up my accounts whenever a gale blows.'

Phil couldn't help smirking. So the smooth-talking naval man of action got seasick. 'You're joining us landlubbers?' He didn't hide the amusement in his

voice.

Ashdown looked at him suspiciously before resuming his habitual expression of lofty disinterest. 'It seems they think I have a talent for sniffing out information. I'd sent a report back concerning my suspicions about Jenson.' At the admiral's arched eyebrows, Ashdown elucidated. 'He was always lurking about the poop deck near the captain's cabin... disappearing for hours whenever we were on shore leave. Spotted him with a cypher book one night. Knew it wasn't one of ours.'

The admiral grunted. 'A wrong 'un indeed. Should be flogged round the fleet.' He sent Ashdown an accusing glare. 'Pity I didn't know about this before I allowed him to take Sophia.'

Phil ignored this interchange. 'What is happening about him anyway?' Jenson was someone else on whom he needed to plant a facer. His knuckles would be raw with the number of people he planned to avenge for Sophia's shabby treatment. Nobody would ever treat her improperly once she was his wife.

'After he'd told me that farrago of lies about being knocked out, he said he would be returning to his ship.' The admiral tapped out the ash from his pipe, then started to refill it from a pouch secreted in his jacket. 'He was on watch when the customs men boarded his mother's ship – must have seen the flashes and heard the noise and guessed it was all going wrong.' There was another pause while the admiral set a lighted taper to the bowl of his pipe and inhaled until the tobacco took. Satisfied, he resumed his account. 'The first mate didn't report his absence straightaway. Thought Jenson had been taken short and gone to the roundhouse. But when Jenson hadn't returned after more than half an hour, the mate notified the captain. A search of the ship found no trace. Must have gone over the side like Ruth.'

Phil frowned. It was too much to hope that the cur had drowned along with his mother. He wondered what Jenson's plans were.

'The marines are searching Falmouth and Flushing,' Ashdown added. 'But I wager he's well away. His mother had her contacts here... He will get help from someone. Then it's my guess he will head for London. A man can become invisible there.'

Phil nodded. His experience of London told him Ashdown was right.



Sophia looked out of the window at the carriages rolling past on the cobbled street below. Several weeks had elapsed since the dreadful night when she'd been aboard Ruth Newbody's ship. It gave her some small comfort to see normal life continuing, helping to banish the black thoughts about her family. But how she wished Ruth's body would be found and she could be sure she was dead.

She shivered and made an effort to rid her mind of these lowering thoughts by

concentrating on the elegant costume of a passing lady, accompanied by her maid, strolling up Great Pulteney Street. The lady, attired in a cream morning walking dress, a sky-blue mantle, and a matching cape edged with lace was heading towards Sydney Gardens. A straw bonnet embellished with blue ribbons was perched jauntily on the lady's head, and buff-coloured gloves and matching boots with blue laces completed her outfit. Sophia watched her longingly and with more than a touch of envy. She was probably on her way to an assignation with a gentleman in the nearby gardens.

Thinking of this brought Sophia's mind back to Phil. He'd encouraged her to leave Falmouth with Emmaline, agreeing with her that a short break from the town with such recent unpleasant memories would help Sophia's recovery. He'd also insisted on journeying to Oxfordshire to question Phoebe Archer. Sophia frowned, recalling the argument she'd had with him and his outright refusal to sanction her travelling to Crawley. Emmaline had backed him up, of course, in her oblique way.

'I need you here, Sophia. I've had such a shock with all that has happened. I can't possibly manage on my own.'

Emmaline's pretence at frailty convinced no-one, least of all Sophia who knew Emmaline was the most level-headed and unflappable female of her acquaintance. It was guilt at opposing Emmaline's will, a stalwart friend throughout, that finally convinced Sophia to leave the matter to Phil. But to give him his due, he'd listened to her arguments and not dismissed them out of hand. She smiled to herself. Phil had changed during their acquaintance, or rather her opinion of him had changed. He was not the arrogant, overbearing man she'd first considered him to be. Oh, he could be forthright in his views, and they often disagreed, but he listened to what she had to say and was not too proud to admit that sometimes she was correct, and he was wrong. They'd spent time together – carefully chaperoned, of course – during which they'd got to know one another better. She now understood why Phil had at first seemed overbearing, and she had learned of the reason fuelling his pursuit of a single, carefree life. Like her, he'd been brought up in a loveless household, making him particularly wary of marriage and set on steering his own course. Two independent-minded people. No wonder they'd clashed when they'd first met! As she watched her breath condense on the window, she knew she couldn't imagine making a life with anyone other than Phil. But everything depended on what discoveries were made about her father's family.

The drawing-room door opened, and Sophia turned to see Emmaline.

'There you are! This is such a lovely room, don't you agree, with its views on to Great Pulteney Street?'

Sophia's eyes were drawn to what looked like two letters clutched in Emmaline's hand. 'See what has arrived: a letter for me from the admiral and one

for you from Mr Cullen.’ Emmaline’s eyes twinkled as she handed Sophia a sealed note. ‘He must be missing you, my dear.’

‘I wonder if he has discovered anything,’ said Sophia as she broke the wafer with trembling fingers. The date at the top of the letter indicated that it had been written two days previously and sent from London. A quick scan of the words sent the blood rushing to her cheeks. Such warm, affectionate sentiments. He’d addressed her as his beloved and signed himself as hers ‘always’. A lump formed in her throat. He was still certain that they would be married. An optimism she didn’t share. Her father was bound to have been as much of a blackguard as her aunt and cousin for him to have been cast out by his family.

‘You look quite pink, my dear. I do hope Mr Cullen hasn’t overstepped the mark with the sentiments in his letter.’ Emmaline sent her an arch look. ‘I suppose I should have read it first to ensure the proprieties... But you are a betrothed couple, after all.’ A faraway look came into her eye. ‘I remember the letters I received from the admiral.’

Sophia bit her lip. ‘No, nothing like that. He says that he has discovered the name and location of my father’s family and that he will be journeying here shortly. He mentions that he has some tasks to undertake first in London but hopes that they will not long delay him.’

‘Did he not give any details?’ Emmaline’s expression of frustration and disappointment at the lack of information matched Sophia’s own. Why had the dratted man omitted to tell her anything? *He doesn’t trust me not to visit them on my own, that’s why.* And he was right, of course. It had been Sophia’s intention from the start to face her father’s family by herself and tell them of the cost of their actions. If she was going to be mired by the taint of scandal, she would make sure that they were aware of their part in it. And she didn’t want Phil to witness any of that.

Then, if it all turned out as she expected, her plan was to return to Crawley. If she could persuade the Reverend Simpson to help her once more, she might perhaps get a position at a charity school. She could disappear from Phil’s life, and he could find a more respectable wife. Emmaline and her husband would no longer have a traitor’s relative under their roof. It was the best way she could repay them for all their kindnesses.



Phil patted the pocket of his greatcoat and smiled to himself. He’d accomplished everything he’d set out to do on this short trip to London, and it was almost time to set off for Bath. Just one call to make at the War Office in Whitehall for a final briefing. He took a last look at his study and remembered the encounter he’d had there with Sophia. She’d called herself Miss Hart, and he’d been so irritated with her for questioning his authority. What a minx! Why hadn’t he spotted the

intelligence in her eyes and her spark of independence? He'd been far too focussed on his own plans, that's why, only seeing the shabby dress and the reddened hands of a servant. If he'd truly taken note of her, he'd have saved himself a whole lot of trouble... and her too. They might already be married.

His heart lurched at the memory of the danger she'd been in, his hands clenching involuntarily. He was not going to let that happen again. The more time he'd spent with Sophia – and thanks to Mrs Pridham turning the occasional blind eye, there had been many occasions in the previous weeks when they'd been alone – the more he'd been convinced that she was the wife for him. Once this business with her father's family was settled, she would abandon her qualms about marriage. Not good enough for him indeed! They would settle down on his estate, and he would still be able to send reports back up to London, thanks to his network of informants. And there would be occasional trips to London for both of them, of course. But for the most part he would be content to remain at home with Sophia and hopefully a growing nursery. His eyes misted. Children... their children. He never thought he'd be longing for children. How he'd changed!

There was a tap on the door, and Mrs Dobson bobbed her head into the study.

'Begging your pardon, sir. The carriage is ready.'

'I'm just coming, Mrs Dobson.'

Phil picked up his hat and strode out of the door. The door of the carriage was standing open, its plain, unliveried sides giving no clue that it belonged to the War Office. Phil glanced up at the driver whom, with his collar turned up and hat pulled down over his eyes, he did not recognise. Not the usual chap. Thinking no more about it, Phil stepped inside. The door banged shut behind him, and the coach started to move. It was a few seconds before he realised he was not alone.

'Good day, Mr Cullen.'

He looked up to see the cold eyes of Lieutenant Jenson, a pistol in his hand. No longer in naval uniform but dressed all in black, the cur looked what he was, thought Phil: an evil, treacherous snake.

'Fancy seeing you here, Jenson. The sea no longer to your liking?'

A sharp blow to the side of his face with the pistol sent Phil reeling against the side panels. Nevertheless, he was glad his jaunty greeting had touched a nerve. Phil rubbed his cheek and pulled himself upright.

Jenson glared. 'Don't bait me, Cullen. I'm not in the mood. You're only alive because I've a purpose in mind for you. If you push me too hard, I'll put an end to you sooner than I had intended.'

Phil's mind raced. What purpose did Jenson have in mind? He was in no doubt that the man was going to kill him at some point.

'You took me by surprise, that's all. Thought you were dead.'

A strangled laugh came from Jenson's throat. 'Not me, I'm afraid. So sorry to disappoint you. I still have plans to execute.' Jenson, the gun still firmly pointed

at Phil's chest, settled back into his seat. 'Now, you might as well make yourself comfortable. We're going for rather a long journey.'

Phil sent him a questioning look.

'Don't think you can escape, Cullen. We'll be stopping shortly, and my friend Mr Dobbs will be joining us... You remember Dobbs, don't you? He remembers you.'

Phil's heart sank. If Dobbs was also in the carriage, there would be little or no chance of him being able to overpower Jenson and get away. He was trying to decide if he should make his move when the coach started to slow. Too late. The door opened and the vehicle tilted as Dobbs heaved his bulk inside. Dobbs grinned at Phil as he squashed into the seat beside him. His meaty paw landed on Phil's knee.

'Nice to see you again, sir.'

Phil closed his eyes and tried to think. If it was going to be a long journey, he might as well use the time usefully.

Chapter 20



SOPHIA DRUMMED HER FINGERS on the window pane. It was grey and raining outside, the weather matching her mood. Phil had not arrived on the day he'd indicated. In fact, there'd been no word from him for several days. Where was he? The dratted man. Had he gone to see her father's family on his own? She'd give him a piece of her mind if he'd done anything so high-handed. She was frustrated and angry, both with Phil and herself. Why did being a female mean one couldn't act independently? It was so unfair. A man could jaunt about the country to his heart's content, but the minute a female poked her head out of doors, she was subject to all sorts of restrictions... Why, even the formidable Mrs Grover had been subject to the condescension of the innkeepers and the coach driver on that journey back to Oxford.

She turned away from the rain-spattered window and looked at the clock again – it showed three o'clock. Hardly any time had passed since the last time she'd checked. Emmaline had gone on her own for once to visit a dear friend who was ill. She'd insisted that Sophia remain at home, telling her that she would be bored at the conversation of two old ladies. Despite Sophia's protestations to the contrary – she quite enjoyed listening to the reminiscences of Emmaline and her friends, most of them naval wives – Emmaline had set off on her own. Sophia had tried to settle to some embroidery, but her unquiet mind could not concentrate on the intricate stitchwork required, and her tambour and its silks now lay abandoned on the work table.

A knock at the front door drew her attention. She knew no other visitors were expected. Emmaline held her "at homes" every Tuesday, and today was Thursday. Sophia's pulse quickened. Perhaps this was Phil returned at last. She waited, nerves stretched, for the butler to enter and announce who was calling. At last came the tap on the door.

'Come in.' Her voice quavered.

'A letter for you, Miss Turner.'

Sophia's heart slowed. It was only a letter. Probably Phil notifying her of the reason for his delay. She waited until the butler had departed before she broke the seal. Her heart skipped a beat as she recognised the bold strokes of Phil's handwriting. How often she'd read and re-read all the letters he'd sent, fondly imagining him frowning as he issued his usual instructions to be careful. She smiled to herself and started to read.

He was requesting that she meet him in a property he had taken in Trim Street.

That made her pause. Trim Street was not in the most salubrious part of town. Why on earth would he have taken rooms there? But she trusted his judgement. He must have some reason for asking her to meet him there. She would trust him with her life.

His final sentence was an instruction not to delay. She looked at the clock again. It was a quarter past the hour. What should she do? Emmaline wouldn't be home for at least another hour. *Drat it.* She would go. She would leave a note for Emmaline and slip out of the house without a maid. She knew where Trim Street was. She ran up the stairs to her bedroom and found her pelisse and bonnet. Glancing out of the window, she was glad to see the rain had blown over. She wouldn't get a soaking at any rate.

Just as she reached the door, she paused, then returned to the dressing table. If she was going to be walking through a less-than-respectable area, it would be as well to have something sharp to hand. She opened the top drawer and searched about for her largest hatpin. Although she'd never really made friends with the girls at the brothel, by listening to their conversations she'd picked up a tip or two. One girl by the name of Bess had recounted how she'd escaped a very rough patron by sticking him with a pin and screaming until she was rescued. Bess had been in disfavour with Ruth afterwards for not being compliant enough – and with the patron, who had paid extra for that service. Sophia had been shocked to the core by the story, not least the part where she learned that Ruth was quite happy to permit the most obnoxious activities to take place in her establishment. But the usefulness of a hatpin had stayed in her mind.

It was relatively easy to slip out of the house unseen. Sophia crossed her fingers and hoped that she would not encounter Emmaline or any of her acquaintances as she made her way through town. It would be difficult to explain what she was doing outside on her own. She headed first towards Argyle Buildings at one end of Great Pulteney Street, where she'd spent the previous afternoon with Emmaline in Gibbon's Public Library. On to Bridge Street and past the White Lion inn and she arrived at the high street. Not far to go now, she told herself. It was busy with people, but she was fortunate not to see anyone she recognised. Keeping her head down and clutching her reticule close to her body under her cloak, she walked past the impressive Guildhall. Emmaline had told her that its ballroom was used for assemblies and balls for those citizens of Bath connected to trade and therefore unwelcome in the loftier assembly rooms of the town.

Sophia crossed over to the Upper Borough Walls and slowed her pace. The buildings here were decidedly shabbier. She turned the corner, and there was Trim Street. Phil had indicated in his letter that the house he had taken was opposite the Unitarian chapel. She located the building and, summoning her nerves, took hold of the knocker, giving the door a sharp rap. The sound of the choir singing in the chapel across the way wafted to her ears, dispelling her faint

feelings of unease.

The door opened and a black-suited butler silently waved her in. Biting the inside of her cheek, Sophia stepped inside, and the door closed behind her. She looked about. The floor was a chequerboard of black-and-white tiles, contrasting with the pale green of the plastered walls. She'd been expecting a house divided into apartments, but this appeared to be one establishment. The doors leading off the entrance hall were all closed. Perhaps Phil had taken the building with a view to some business opportunity, and he wished for her opinion?

'This way, miss. I believe you are expected.' The man led her up a set of stairs to the first floor and gestured to a door on the right. Prickles of fear began to make themselves felt along Sophia's spine. Something was not right. She hesitated. The man smiled. 'Mr Cullen will be pleased to see you, miss.' Reassured, Sophia turned the handle and stepped inside.



Phil groaned and cracked one eye open. Waking up with a sore head was beginning to be something of a habit. He raised himself up from the stale-smelling mattress and immediately slumped back down again. Everything was spinning. The crack on the head administered by Dobbs must have addled his brains. How long had he been unconscious? He'd no recollection of how he'd arrived in this room. *Stay calm. Think. No point in trying to leap up until everything stops moving.* Somehow he knew the movement was not on account of being at sea. He wriggled his arms and his feet. Predictably, they were bound, but at least they were all present and intact... Even better, they seemed to be in working order. No broken bones, as far as he could tell. Well, that was something.

A jolt of fear went through him as he recalled the letter he'd been forced to write. Would Sophia guess it was a trick? No, alas, she trusted him. Why wouldn't she come to meet him, even though the address he'd given was in an insalubrious quarter? He cursed. She was an intelligent female. How many times had she escaped Ruth Newbody's clutches? Too many, as far as he was concerned. Perhaps she would not come alone, despite Jenson's dictated instructions to the contrary. God, how he'd hated writing that missive! But with a pistol to his head, he'd had no option. Jenson had implied that if Sophia could be brought to the house, they would both be allowed to live. Why did he want her? Phil hadn't a clue.

His ears pricked at the sound of voices. They seemed to be coming from downstairs. He dared to raise his head again. Good. The room had steadied somewhat. He could now examine his surroundings without feeling as if he were on a pitching ship. A narrow skylight and the sloping ceiling told him he was in a garret. To his surprise, he discovered that although he was bound, he was not trussed to the bed. Perhaps they'd miscalculated the dose of laudanum they'd forced on him. He grinned to himself. He'd get out of here.

He waited a moment or two before risking putting his feet to the floor. Thank goodness the boards did not creak. He was in his stockinged feet, Dobbs having forced him to remove his boots at some point on the journey – he couldn't quite recall when. The second pair of boots he'd lost in a month. *Blast!* He reminded himself to send the bill for some new ones to the War Office. The only person doing well out of this spy business would be his bootmaker Hoby.

He shuffled to the door, his ears alert for the sound of anyone approaching. Silence. He raised his bound hands and tried the handle. As expected, it was locked. They'd been careless, but not that careless. He eyed the window. It looked promising. If he could free his hands and feet, it might be the way to go. Small, but not too small that he couldn't squeeze out. His eyes narrowed as he weighed up the possibilities. Was there anything he could use to rid himself of his ties? He sat down on the bed. *Think. Think.* The beginnings of a plan began to form. Lifting his legs back onto the bed, he bent his knees towards his chest and encircled them with his arms. Thank God they hadn't thought to lash arms and legs together or tie his hands behind his back. With deft fingers, he started to work on the cords round his ankles.

It wasn't easy – whoever had tied him knew something about knots. Phil guessed it was Jenson. His background at sea would have taught him many such skills. At last, the knot began to give under Phil's tortuous efforts. His fingers were bleeding, but sheer determination kept him going. He had to escape before Sophia arrived.

The last strand gave, and a surge of excitement rose in Phil's chest. Now to put the rest of his plan into action. Swinging his legs off the bed, he stamped on the floor, swearing and cursing as loud as he could. That ought to get someone up to silence him. Footsteps sounded on the stairs. Phil moved quickly to position himself so that he would be behind the door when it opened. A key turned in the lock. He braced himself, one foot against the wall. Success depended on his getting this right.

The door swung open and a heavily accented voice he didn't recognise spoke. 'Come out where I can see you.'

A head peered round the door and Phil made his play, launching himself from the wall to send all his weight against the door. It smashed into the head of his captor, forcing him violently into the doorframe. There was a sickening thud and a scream, then the villain slumped to the floor. Phil shot out of his hiding place. Shouts could be heard from below, and a door banged. Phil's fingers clawed feverishly at the man's jacket, searching for a weapon. Nothing. He heaved the inert body over, and his eyes alighted on a knife lying on the floor. It would have to do. He shoved the body outside and removed the key from the lock. Locking the door from the inside, he wedged the handle of the knife under the mattress, so that the blade stuck outwards, and started to work on his bound hands.

Footsteps thundered up the stairs. The shouting increased. Phil recognised Dobbs' voice.

'Dubois! Dubois!'

So Dubois was the one he'd knocked out cold. That might come in useful. The pounding on the door increased, and Phil worked faster, rubbing his bindings against the blade of the knife. As the last strand gave, he grabbed the knife and launched himself towards the skylight, praying that the door would hold for long enough to give him a chance. The door shook on its hinges as the pounding from the other side increased. If it was Dobbs, Phil knew it wouldn't take more than one or two blows before giving way.

He twisted the window catch, straining with the effort. It wouldn't budge. The door behind him groaned ominously. He swore under his breath. Another twist, and at last the catch gave. Using all the force he could muster, Phil heaved, and the window slid up, crashing into the frame. A pistol shot sent splinters of wood shooting round the room. Whoever was on the other side was getting desperate. A noise like that was bound to attract attention. Phil didn't wait to see who was coming. Knife between his teeth, he swung his body up, hauling himself onto the roof tiles just as the sound of cracking wood reached his ears.

Now it was a case of hoping that the roof would take his weight. He set off, thinking it a blessing in disguise that he wasn't wearing boots. The tiles were slippery from the recent rain. He looked back to see Dobbs glaring in frustration from the opening from which he'd just emerged. Phil smirked. The big oaf was too bulky for the small aperture. Phil's smirk turned to horror as Dobbs aimed the pistol at him. Phil ducked, and there was a sharp explosion. The ball whizzed past his head, embedding itself in the chimney of the adjacent house. Phil scrambled along the tiles towards the adjoining property and clambered onto the next roof, clutching at the ridge before allowing himself to slide down until his feet met the guttering. He took a breath and dared to glance down. The noise of the pistol had attracted attention. Passers-by were looking up and pointing. He had an idea.

'Fire! Fire!' There was nothing like the danger of a spreading fire to galvanise people into action.

At once, there were screams and the sound of pounding on doors. Men rushed with buckets, and there were shouts of 'Fetch ladders!' and 'Don't worry, lad, we'll get you!' ringing through the air.

Phil watched as Dobbs waved a fist in frustration before disappearing back into the attic. Now all he had to do was wait for someone to bring the promised ladder and, as soon as he was down, contact the Watch. Pray God Sophia had not yet acted on the note.

As soon as she entered the room, Sophia knew something was wrong. She turned to flee through the door, but too late... It was closed, and the chap she'd taken for

a butler was now leaning against it, arms folded, an unpleasant smile on his lips.

‘Good of you to join us, Miss Turner. Though I suppose I may call you Cousin Sophia now. Do take a seat. Mother and I have been waiting.’ Sophia spun round at the sound of the voice. Jenson gestured coolly to a chair by the fireplace. Seated at the other side of the hearth, he looked quite at home, booted legs casually crossed and a glass in his hand. He even had the gall to smile.

Sophia’s stomach lurched at his words. Her eyes turned to the figure seated at a small desk near the window. It was Ruth. Still attired in men’s garb, her left arm was bound up in a sling.

‘I... I thought...’

Ruth set down her pen and smirked. ‘Yes, you thought I was dead. As does the War Office, I’m pleased to say. Who would believe a mere female, one of the weaker sex, could outwit those clodhopping customs men?’ She snorted. ‘Twice now.’

Sophia couldn’t resist. ‘But you have been wounded... and lost your gold.’

Ruth sprang from her seat, a vicious expression on her face that sent shivers of fear down Sophia’s spine. Despite her useless arm, Ruth still looked well able to inflict injury on anyone who incurred her displeasure. ‘Watch what you say. It wouldn’t do to goad me.’

Suppressing her fear, Sophia stood her ground. She’d had enough of being deceived and bullied. ‘Why did you trick me into coming here? You know I want nothing to do with your plans. What have you done with Mr Cullen?’ She desperately needed to know he was alive.

Ruth shrugged and nodded towards her son.

Sophia’s fear was replaced by anger. ‘You vile cur! Where is Mr Cullen? What have you done?’

Jenson ignored her and took a sip from his glass, enraging her even more. What had she done to deserve relatives like this? She advanced towards him, both her hands balled into fists. How she’d love to wipe that condescending expression off his face.

‘Don’t worry, he’s hereabouts. Still breathing,’ he said at last, giving her a sardonic smile. ‘But not for long.’

It took a second for his drawled words to sink in. Sophia halted and watched tensely as Ruth moved behind her son’s chair, placed a hand on his shoulder, and smiled fondly down at him.

‘W-w-what do you mean?’ She inwardly cursed herself for sounding weak. But at least she knew that Phil was still alive.

‘The pair of you have caused me a great deal of trouble... Especially you, Cousin.’ Jenson’s eyes glittered with a look so malevolent that it caused her to catch her breath. It seemed the apple didn’t fall far from the tree... He was his mother’s son. Her eyes flicked to Ruth’s face. Why had she not spotted the

likeness sooner?

Sophia edged towards the chair he'd indicated and sat down. Her legs were barely keeping her upright by now, if truth be known, but she didn't want her aunt and cousin to see how weak she felt.

'Leave us, Dubois, we have things in hand here.' It was Ruth who spoke, a smile on her lips.

The butler muttered something in answer that Sophia couldn't understand and left the room. It was now just the three of them. Her mind raced. How could she possibly overpower this unholy pair or distract them sufficiently to make her escape and get help? Her eyes darted round and alighted on the fire irons... But they were on Jenson's side of the hearth and tucked neatly behind the brass fender. It would be impossible to reach them without either him or Ruth deducing her intent. Quelling her rising panic, she told herself to remain calm. She focussed on what Jenson was now saying.

'It will give me the greatest pleasure to see you both dead... Something I intend to undertake myself, I think I should let you know.' He sighed and shook his head. 'Why Mother thought she could persuade you to join us, I have no idea.'

He flicked a glance up at Ruth, who shrugged.

'I admit, I got it wrong. Who would guess that your principles were strong enough to turn down the opportunity I offered you? Wealth and riches far beyond those you could ever reasonably expect in your situation.' She glared at Sophia, who returned her stare. Inside, Sophia was numb. Jenson intended to kill her. And Phil. There was nothing to lose. She had to do something to stop this evil pair.

'It's all up for me now with the navy.' Jenson was speaking again. Ruth, with a final malevolent smile at Sophia and an affectionate pat on her son's shoulder, strolled back to the escritoire and resumed her writing. Jenson continued. 'All those years of hardship wasted. Still... I suppose I've learned some skills that will be of use. Napoleon is looking for out-of-the-way places on the coast to land his armies, and I've been promised great rewards for my help. I know the coast of this benighted land better than most. Places where a man can come to shore safely... and unobserved.' He grinned at Sophia, revealing his schoolboy-like gap teeth. It was a pity his soul wasn't as attractive as his face, she thought. In other circumstances, his guileless smile, sandy hair, and gentlemanly charm, all dressed in a smart naval uniform, would have had any young woman thinking him the perfect catch. She'd certainly been fooled.

'I also know places where it is easy to drop a body or two. Where they will be washed away in the currents, never to turn up on shore... Not these shores, at any rate. And we don't want evidence of our misdeeds, do we?' He addressed her directly, a dangerous glint in his eye. There was a snigger from the desk where Ruth was seated.

Sophia remained tight-lipped, knowing instinctively that a reply was not

required.

Shouts from somewhere within the house caught their attention. The pounding of feet running up the stairs could be heard. Ruth stood up. Jenson frowned, set his glass down, and strode towards the door, gesturing with one hand. 'I'll deal with it, Mother.'

Sophia's heart started to beat a little faster. Had Phil managed to overpower his captors?

Ruth's eyes were focussed on her son, so Sophia slid the hatpin out of her reticule and slipped it up her sleeve.

'What's going on?' Jenson had the door open and was yelling. Indecipherable shouts echoed back. The thumps and bumps from upstairs continued. It sounded as if someone was trying to break a door down. Sophia stood up and edged towards him, keeping her eyes all the time on Ruth, who was now peering through the window at the street below.

'Get it sorted quickly, for goodness' sake, before anyone hears that racket and calls the Watch,' Ruth ordered, without taking her eyes away from the scene below.

Pulse racing, Sophia knew this might be her chance. She needed to incapacitate Jenson while he was distracted and get down the stairs as fast as she could.

Upstairs, a shot rang out, and Sophia took her chance. She aimed the hatpin at Jenson's neck, but he turned at just that moment, sending her aim off. The result was only a vicious scratch on his neck. Sophia's mouth gaped in shock.

'You bitch!'

His arm came out, and a fist in her face sent her reeling back. She stumbled across the rug and fell sprawling to the floor near the hearth. She lay there motionless for several seconds, rendered stupid by the blow. By the time she was able to focus, Jenson was standing astride her, a pistol in his hand. Her skirts were up around her knees, exposing her stockinged legs.

He leered at her. 'A pity... you might have been an asset to the business if the rest of you is as delicious.' He licked his lips.

'Enough. Finish her off. We need to get out now.' The barked order came from Ruth, who was scooping up papers from the desk and shoving them into a satchel.

Shouts of 'Fire!' could be heard coming from the street.

Dobbs' voice called from the doorway. 'Best get away, guv. Looks like it's all up for us.'

Jenson turned his head from Sophia. 'Mother and I will follow shortly, Dobbs. Meet us in the usual place.' When he turned back, his expression had changed.

'Not the end I'd planned for you, but still...' There was a deadly intent in his eyes, and Sophia knew she was about to die.

'Get on with it!' Ruth had moved across the room and, from the direction of her voice, seemed to be standing directly behind Sophia's head.

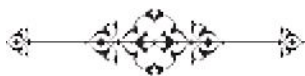
Jenson smirked and raised the pistol, pointing it at her chest. 'Goodbye, Cousin. You could have had everything. Instead...' He let the word hang in the air.

Sophia summoned all her strength. She wasn't going to lie there while he calmly took aim and Ruth gloated. She'd inflict some damage before she breathed her last. The fire irons were within reach. She flung out her hand.

'Don't bother.' Jenson lashed out with his foot, sending a sharp pain shooting up her arm. She screwed her eyes tight, waiting for him to finish her off. This was it... The end.

There was a curse, and a weight fell across her. Before she could react, there was an explosion and a woman's scream, then everything went black.

Chapter 21



PHIL LISTENED TO THE commotion coming from the house. His escape had set them all in a panic. He peered over the edge of the roof as two figures slipped out through the front door and lost themselves in the milling crowd. By his bulk, he recognised one as Dobbs, the other, holding his head, was Dubois. There was no sign of Jenson. Where was he? Still inside?

‘Here you are, matey,’ a voice shouted up to him as a ladder was propped against the wall. Phil slid nimbly down and grabbed by the collar the first respectably dressed person he could find.

‘Fetch the Watch. Now!’ Phil’s barked order silenced his victim’s natural objections to being accosted in such a manner. As if recognising a man of authority, the chap touched his hat and nodded.

‘Yessir.’ The fellow turned and ran.

Phil strode up to the now-open door.

A sound very like a pistol being fired came from one of the upstairs rooms. There was a woman’s scream. Phil’s first thought was that it might be Sophia. Please God she had not followed the instructions in his letter and was safely tucked up with Mrs Pridham, oblivious to the goings-on here.

‘Come with me,’ he yelled to his followers. There was safety in numbers, and he wasn’t sure what he might find.

The crowd surged in after him, many looking bemused and still clutching leather buckets. Water slopped onto the polished tiles.

‘Where’s the fire?’

‘Thought I heard a shot.’

‘This way.’ Phil took the stairs two at a time, heart hammering in his chest. He paused on the landing. One of the doors to his right was ajar. Holding his arms wide to hold back his companions, who seemed eager to douse anything with water, he moved stealthily forward.

Pulse thundering in his ears, he squeezed his head round the door. The sight that greeted him froze him to the marrow. On the floor near the fireplace lay Sophia’s lifeless body. Draped over her was Jenson. Blood was everywhere. A pistol lay on the rug. Another body, at first glance a man’s, lay nearby.

Phil rushed to Sophia’s side and dropped to his knees.

‘Nooooo!’ The wail came from his own throat.

Phil started to heave Jenson’s body away in disgust and discovered the man was breathing. Blood was pouring from a wound to his head. Ignoring Jenson’s

groans, Phil rolled him away from Sophia and gently cradled her face. He couldn't tell where she'd been hurt. There was a flickering beneath his fingers as he felt at her throat.

'Fetch a doctor. I think I feel a faint pulse.' He sent up a silent prayer. *Thank God.* Sophia's eyelids fluttered.

He whispered, 'Darling, I'm here. You're going to be all right.' She was going to be all right, he told himself... He'd do everything in his power to ensure it.

'Phil... Oh, Phil. They were going to kill you.'

'Shh, love. Save your breath for now.' His heart swelled. She'd come for him! What a brave and foolhardy thing to do. Infuriating, foolish, and most perfect of females. He must point that out to her when she recovered... She was going to recover. She had to, for his sake. He couldn't live without her.

'Where is she?' Sophia murmured.

'Who, love?' Phil frowned.

'Ruth.'

Phil's heart skipped a beat. 'She was here? Are you sure?'

'Yes, she told him to shoot me.'

Phil's jaw clenched at Sophia's words, knowing how close he'd come to losing her. 'What happened?'

'I tried to stop him. I went for the fire iron, but he kicked me, so I closed my eyes, sure I was going to die.' Phil shot a look of disgust at the still-groaning Jenson. The man really was a worm.

Sophia continued. 'She was standing behind me, I think. I heard his pistol fire... and then I must have fainted.'

Phil removed his arms from around Sophia's shoulders as she struggled to sit up. He moved towards the other body. It was several seconds before recognition dawned. The body he'd thought a man's was indeed Ruth Newbody's. He'd always had niggling doubts about whether she'd really drowned at Falmouth. She'd fooled everyone a second time. But now she was definitely dead, her cold eyes staring sightlessly up at the ceiling. The gaping wound in her chest told its own story. Somehow Jenson had shot his own mother. A hand crept into his. Sophia had joined him, her face white.

'She's definitely dead?' came her whispered question.

'Absolutely.'

She sighed. 'Thank God.'



It didn't take long for Phil to organise his followers. Jenson, who was now fully conscious, was trussed up, and soon after the arrival of two officers of the Watch, he was led away. It had only taken a few whispered words from Phil and the presence of Admiral Pridham, who had fortuitously arrived in Bath that very

afternoon, to convince the officers that Lieutenant Jenson was a wanted man.

He'd not gone quietly, screaming at the sight of his mother's body, cursing Phil for a meddling fool and sending Sophia such looks of venom that Phil had been glad to have him removed from the house.

Phil took Sophia to another room. He didn't want to linger any longer than necessary near Ruth Newbody's corpse, which had not yet been taken away. He and Sophia were alone. The admiral, after ensuring that Sophia was unhurt, had accompanied Jenson to ensure he was securely locked up until he could be brought before a magistrate.

'You've had a bad shock,' said Phil, watching Sophia take a tentative sip of the brandy he'd managed to procure for her. Her mouth pursed in distaste, and he smiled in relief. It could all have gone so badly wrong.

'I still don't quite understand what happened,' she said, turning troubled blue eyes towards him. 'I was convinced I was dead. I heard the shot. It was so loud, and then everything went still. It... it was only when I heard your voice... And even then, I thought for a moment we had both died and I was in heaven.' She fluttered her eyelashes and looked down. Her cheeks were crimson.

Phil smiled, inwardly delighted that she should think herself in heaven with him. 'I think the explosion of the pistol stunned you. Jenson had a gash on one side of his head, which must have knocked him senseless. I can only deduce that somehow he collided with the fender. Can you remember exactly what happened before you passed out?'

Sophia's face screwed up in concentration. 'Let me think... The three of us were together. Ruth was at the desk, and the lieutenant was telling me of his plans. Do you know, he is committed to Napoleon's cause?'

Phil nodded. 'Go on.'

'Well, there was a commotion upstairs, and he went to the door to see what was going on. Ruth was looking out of the window, so I thought perhaps it was a chance for me...'

The muscles in Phil's neck tensed. He knew he wasn't going to like what she was about to tell him. 'What did you do?'

'I had a hatpin—'

He cut her off. 'A *hatpin*?' Dear Lord, had she tried to subdue two of the most dangerous characters he'd ever had the misfortune to encounter armed only with a bloody hatpin?

'Yes,' she said matter of factly. 'I thought that perhaps it would distract him for a moment and give me time to get out of the door.'

'But it didn't?'

Her lips pursed. 'No. He turned before I could strike properly. He hit me, sending me flying to the floor. By the time I'd recovered my wits, he was standing over me. Ruth was angry and shouting at him to hurry up and kill me.' She

paused. 'Oh yes. We heard shots.' A nerve twitched in Phil's cheek. Things could have gone so badly wrong; her recounting of the events was making him inwardly quake.

'I think they fired at the door where I was being held captive – I'd locked it from the inside. And of course, when I was on the roof, Dobbs fired at me.'

Sophia gasped. 'What? You were on the roof? He was shooting at you?'

It was his turn to feel uncomfortable, so he took her hand. 'Stop. It's all over now; we are both safe. Continue with your account.' He needed to get the full picture so that he could write a report for the authorities. He wasn't going to allow Sophia to be put through the ordeal of recounting it again. She'd been through enough, and it was his job to protect her.

She gulped down a breath. 'I thought I might have one last chance, so I reached out... tried to grab the fire irons... something to hit him with. I wasn't going to lie there and let him calmly shoot me.'

Phil swallowed. He'd never met a female like her. Every day she surprised him with her bravery. He scooped her into his arms. 'Oh, my love. What a brave little thing you are!'

'Nonsense.' Her voice was muffled against his shoulder, but there was no mistaking the exasperation in her tone. He released her slightly and looked into her now-stormy eyes. 'What a ninnyhammer I would have been to let him kill me without a fight. You wouldn't have been so compliant, would you?'

Feeling slightly ashamed of himself, he bit his lip.

'No, my darling, I wouldn't... And I'm glad you didn't.' He'd made the mistake of underestimating her again, something he would in future avoid. His Sophia was truly a force to be reckoned with.

'Anyway,' she continued, 'he kicked my arm, and I'm afraid that was when I closed my eyes. I heard Ruth shouting – she was somewhere behind me, I think. I felt him sway, and then a weight landed on top of me. There was a loud noise... then shortly after, you found me.'

Phil guessed it had been the kick that had sent Jenson off balance – serve him right, the cur. It was bad enough kicking a man when he's down... but a woman? It was indefensible.

'That's it, then... That's what caused him to lose his balance. He fired the pistol, and the ball meant for you hit Ruth instead.' Phil still had his arms around her shoulders. From downstairs came the sound of voices, one of them recognisably belonging to Mrs Pridham.

'I believe your friend is here to escort you home.' He gave Sophia a gentle squeeze. Now was not the time for a kiss, he told himself, no matter how tempting her lips were, so close to his own. He forced himself to move away and saw what he thought might have been disappointment reflected in her eyes. Did she, too, crave a kiss? His heart lifted in anticipation. Soon, soon! And there was other

important news to impart to her, though that, too, could wait.

Chapter 22



SOPHIA PACED IMPATIENTLY UP and down the drawing room. When would Phil arrive? She really wanted to make progress with discovering her father's family. Once that was done, she would be able to move on with her life. She had it all planned if matters turned out as she expected with her family. She and Phil would have a long talk and come to a joint decision over when to break their engagement. He surely must see sense about that now. She also remembered his look of shock when she'd recounted how she'd attacked Lieutenant Jenson. No man wanted a wife who was as headstrong as she was.

But he'd called her "love" and "darling", a little voice inside her head reminded her. No, he had just been relieved that she was safe, that's all. It meant nothing. He was probably even now thinking of a way to break it to her gently, but there would be no need.

She knew her chances of making a respectable marriage were non-existent. Who would want to link their family name to that of a family of traitors? It would soon all be in the papers about Jenson's villainy and his links to one of London's most notorious bawds. It wouldn't be long before her own role in the recent events in Bath and Falmouth were discovered. She quaked at the thought. How fortunate that the Pridhams insisted on standing by her, offering her friendship when most people would have cast her out. And Phil too – for what else now could he offer her but friendship? Friendship that she would treasure always.

Stifling imminent tears, Sophia turned as the drawing-room door opened.

'There you are, Sophia.' It was Emmaline. 'Mr Cullen is awaiting you in the study with the admiral. He says he has some important news.' She gave Sophia a sharp look. 'You've not been crying, have you? Oh, my dear, there is no need. That dreadful lieutenant is securely locked up. He cannot hurt you any more.' She pulled a lace handkerchief from her sleeve and handed it to Sophia. 'We can't have you looking like a watering pot, can we?'

Sophia forced a smile. 'I'm all right, honestly.' She linked arms with Emmaline and accompanied her to the study.



Phil was standing near the window in the wood-panelled room that the admiral had designated as his study. The view wasn't as interesting as those from the front of the house. Being at the back, the window overlooked the small courtyard

garden and the mews rather than the bustling thoroughfare of Great Pulteney Street.

He turned as the study door opened, and his breath caught in his throat as he saw Sophia. Dressed in a simple morning gown of pale-blue cambric muslin, buttoned demurely to the throat, and a fine paisley shawl draped round her shoulders, she looked the perfect picture of female innocence. Who would guess that beneath that demure surface beat a heart that was as brave as any gentleman of his acquaintance? He strode swiftly towards her.

‘Good morning, Sophia. You look particularly lovely this morning. The blue of your dress sets off the sparkle in your eyes.’

Sophia gave him what he suspected was a forced smile and accompanied him towards the sofa. He wondered what was on her mind.

‘What a smooth-tongued devil you are, Mr Cullen.’ Emmaline’s chuckled response made him pause. ‘You’re doing it a bit too brown, sir. Anyone with eyes in their head can see our dear Sophia is somewhat out of sorts. And I don’t wonder at it, considering the day she suffered yesterday.’

To Phil’s delight, Emmaline’s acerbic comments had their effect. Sophia sat up and gave him what he knew was a genuine smile.

‘I’m feeling much better, thank you. I had a fit of the megrims last night, that’s all.’ She lifted her eyes to meet his, and the look she gave him he could only describe as challenging. ‘Everything is sorted now. I can start to get on with my life,’ she added.

Her tone set him wondering. What had the minx got in mind? For some unsettling reason, he formed the impression that she meant a future that didn’t include him. He would have to see about that.

Once both ladies were seated, Phil made his announcement. He’d discovered Sophia’s family. He was gratified to note the look of surprise on her face, but surprise didn’t stop her from asking many questions.

‘When may I visit them? I need to do that as soon as possible. The sooner we have settled the matter between us, the sooner I can—’

‘Get on with your life? Yes, I understand, Sophia,’ he said flatly, determined not to let her know he was wise to her plans. She wasn’t going to escape him now, whatever she might think. ‘As it happens, your grandmother is currently in Bath taking the waters.’ He saw the colour drain from her face, but for once she remained tight-lipped. He continued. ‘I understand that she is something of a recluse. She has taken a house on the Royal Crescent with her oldest daughter and her family.’

‘What... what of my grandfather?’

He saw a flash of anxiety cross her face. Her fear of being rejected again was real, even though she claimed she did not care. His heart went out to her. Once she was his, she need never fear rejection again. He managed to keep his tone

neutral, not wanting to add to her distress.

‘He is dead. The title now belongs to his son, your father’s older brother.’

‘What is the family name?’

‘Hart. The viscount’s family name is Hart.’ Phil’s lips curled into a smile, and he winked at her. ‘That was the name you gave me when we first met, if I recall correctly.’

‘Dear me, so it was.’ She looked shocked. ‘I’d seen it written down somewhere... in a bible at Mrs Archer’s. I wonder—’

‘Never mind that, Sophia,’ interrupted Emmaline. ‘When do you intend to visit your grandmother?’

The admiral, who had been silent throughout, piped up. ‘No time like the present. Surprise them with an unexpected attack. It always worked for me.’

‘My dear, she is hopefully going to make peace with them, not break their line and fire from both broadsides,’ retorted Emmaline.

The admiral chuckled at his wife’s words. ‘You know far too much about naval tactics, my dear. Promise me you will never disclose them to those Frenchies.’

Phil inwardly smiled. If they worked hard at it, he and Sophia would have the same trusting and close relationship enjoyed by the admiral and his wife.

‘Sophia, I’m sure you are impatient to meet your grandmother. Mr Cullen here will take you, won’t you, my boy?’ Phil nodded and was pleased when the admiral quashed the objection he could see rising to Sophia’s lips. ‘You’re betrothed, so it will all be quite in order. Mr Cullen’s fine address will add to your standing. I’m sure they will not refuse to admit you.’

‘But... but...’ Sophia stammered, but she didn’t stand a chance, for Emmaline added her exhortations.

‘Do run along, Sophia. The admiral is correct. You must see your grandmother and try to mend the breach with your father’s family.’ She took Sophia’s hand. ‘I cannot believe that she would be so cruel as to deny you, but if she does, you can be assured you will have a home with us until your marriage, won’t she, Admiral?’

‘Indeed, my love.’

A lump formed in Phil’s throat as he heard these words. His darling Sophia was not without friends, and together he and she would create their own loving family, whatever happened when she finally met her father’s family.



Everything was happening so fast. Sophia felt her head was spinning. Yesterday had been more than enough excitement for a lifetime, yet today here she was on her way to meet her grandmother for the very first time. Questions whirled in her brain. Would she even be admitted to the house? According to Ruth Newbody, her father’s family were so high in the instep they had baulked at accepting a

respectable vicar's daughter for their son. What were the chances that they'd changed their opinions? And when news got out about her aunt and cousin... She squirmed in the seat and felt Phil's reassuring hand on her arm.

'Everything will be all right, you'll see.'

It was fine for him to say that. He wasn't the one who had traitors for relatives.

'Hmm, I am not convinced,' she said out loud. She knew she was being shrewish. He didn't deserve her bad temper, but she was thoroughly out of sorts.

'Don't be such a pessimist. Whatever happens' – he leaned closer – 'I have a surprise for you when we are finished here.' The ardent look in his eyes sent her worries scattering and turned her insides all aflutter. She swallowed hard and tried to remain composed, tilting away from him to look straight ahead. She tried to pull herself together, clutching her reticule with white-knuckled fingers, but she couldn't help noticing how the gentleman beside her leisurely crossed one elegant leg over the other. She dragged her eyes away from the sight of his muscular thighs and prayed it would not be long until they arrived at their destination. The temptation to throw herself into his arms was growing stronger with every turn of the carriage wheels.

At last they pulled up outside a house halfway along the Royal Crescent. Sophia craned her neck to gaze up at its imposing façade and thought she really ought to be trying for entry at the rear door, not the front.

Phil jumped out first and proffered his hand to help her down. He held on to her for longer than necessary, giving her a look that told her everything about his feelings. Lord, it would be a wrench to part from him. But once this was settled, her final gift to Phil would be to set him free from their engagement.

Linking her arm with his, he led her up the steps and knocked on the door. A liveried footman opened it and bade them to wait while he took Phil's card.

Sophia's pulse was racing. A few more minutes and it would all be over. Her grip on Phil's arm tightened.

They didn't have to wait long. Ushered up the stairs, they were led into a large drawing room, its floor-to-ceiling windows giving magnificent views onto the Crescent and the pastures beyond.

Sophia halted in the doorway. She'd never seen such a grand room. The curtains and upholstery were in yellow damask, and mirrors hung on the walls beside the fireplace, reflecting the light coming from the windows and making the room feel larger than it was. A lady rose to greet them, and Phil bowed.

'My lady—'

'I am not the dowager,' she interrupted. 'I am Mrs Evans, the dowager's daughter. What can I do for you, Mr Cullen, and why do you need to see my mother? She is not very strong and does not receive many people.' Mrs Evans, who was dressed in a morning robe of spotted pink muslin with a cottage cap of lace trimmed with pink ribbons on her head, turned an interested gaze on to

Sophia, who met her eyes with a frank stare of her own. Mrs Evans didn't seem aloof; one could almost describe her greeting as friendly, she thought. How long would that last once her identity was revealed?

'I understand completely, Mrs Evans. May I introduce my betrothed – Sophia Hart?' At Phil's words, Mrs Evans' eyes widened, and she grasped the back of the nearest chair to steady herself.

'Hart, you say? Sophia Hart... Could you... Are you related to a James Hart?'

Sophia nodded. 'Yes, ma'am. I've been told that it was my father's name.'

'Oh, my goodness.' Mrs Evans sank down into the chair. 'Tell me, is dear James... Is he truly dead? We were told...' A tear rolled down the lady's cheek and she put her face into her hands. 'Poor James. I didn't want to believe it, but I know we are too late. And your mother? Did that woman lie about her?'

Heart pounding and not understanding the questions, Sophia rushed over and knelt beside the chair. The poor lady was distraught. She pulled a handkerchief from her reticule and pressed it into Mrs Evans' hands. The lady wiped at her eyes, and when she seemed to have got her emotions under control, Sophia spoke.

'Mrs Evans, my father died before I was born, and my mother died giving birth to me. I do not remember her at all.'

Mrs Evans brushed away a tear and looked into Sophia's eyes. Sophia gasped. It was like looking at her own reflection. Mrs Evans' vivid blue eyes matched her own.

She touched Sophia's cheek with a gentle hand. 'So like James... The same colouring. The same determined chin. It's a wonder I didn't recognise you for who you are straightaway.' She stood up and led Sophia over to a sofa. 'Come and sit next to me. I think some explanations are called for... from both of us.'

Sophia nodded, and despite her earlier nerves, a calmness settled over her. Perhaps her past wasn't as clear-cut as she had thought. Perhaps her future too.

Mrs Evans took charge. 'I think I should start by telling you something of James. He was my younger brother – a charming, handsome scamp.' She smiled wistfully. 'He was rather indulged by everyone because he was the youngest, and I suppose he was somewhat headstrong. When he came home and announced he had fallen in love, he took it badly when Father refused to sanction his choice. Father decided to put his foot down for once and told James to stay away until he had outgrown his infatuation.' She sighed. 'None of us thought it would all end so badly.'

Sophia swallowed. Yes, it had all ended badly indeed.

Mrs Evans continued. 'Father thought James would soon return, his tail between his legs, but as time went on and he didn't reappear, Father's attitude hardened. Martin and I were forbidden to mention James' name.' Seeing Sophia's look of confusion, she explained. 'Martin is my older brother. Mother, of course, was heartbroken... James was her youngest, you see?' She sighed. 'This went on

for several years. But shortly before he died, Father had a change of heart and begged Martin to find James, instructing him to let James know that all was forgiven and that whoever he had chosen as his wife would be welcomed into our family. Our inquiries led us to a woman called Archer – your mother’s sister, I believe.’ Sophia listened with growing astonishment. Everything she’d been told, everything she’d believed, had been wrong or a lie. Mrs Evans’ next words filled her with horror.

‘Mrs Archer told us that James and his wife were both long dead, together with their baby daughter. Said it was all Father’s fault.’

Sophia’s shock must have registered on her face, for Mrs Evans suddenly leapt up and rang the bell for a servant. ‘What am I thinking? Let me order some tea to settle our nerves. You’ve gone quite pale.’

Still in shock at Mrs Evans’ revelations, Sophia tipped her head to look at Phil, who was standing nearby, one protective hand on her shoulder. Never had she needed his comfort so much. ‘I don’t understand, Phil. Why did Mrs Archer say I was dead? I’d have thought she’d have been glad to get me off her hands. She didn’t like me.’

He gave a derisive grunt. ‘Don’t forget she was receiving an allowance for your upkeep from Ruth. If she had given you up, the allowance would have stopped. I suspect, from what you’ve told me, not all of it was spent on you.’

Mrs Evans looked puzzled but didn’t ask for an explanation. ‘Ah, here’s the tea. Set it down there, Nancy.’

The maid set down a delicate tea service, each piece decorated with a hunting scene against a background pattern of pink; there was a teapot, a creamer, a lidded sugar bowl, and three tea bowls, all placed on a matching cabaret tray. It was quite the loveliest tea set Sophia had seen. Even Emmaline, who had a love of such fine items, did not possess one quite as beautiful as this.

The next few moments were taken up with all the calming ritual of tea-pouring and inconsequential chat about the weather. Something both ladies needed after all the emotional upheavals of the previous half hour.

Setting her tea bowl back down on the tray, Mrs Evans announced with a smile that she was going to talk to the dowager. ‘I need to prepare her to meet you. This could be the very news she needs to restore her to health. She has never been the same since we were told James was dead, and the sight of you might just be the restorative she needs.’ She patted Sophia’s cheek. ‘You’re the very image of him, my dear.’



The next few hours left Sophia in a state of bewilderment. Nothing was as she’d expected. Mrs Evans, who now insisted she be called Aunt Felicity, had been correct in her assumption about the effect of Sophia’s presence on her

grandmother. The dowager entered the room on the arm of her daughter. She was slightly taller than Sophia herself, silver hair piled on her head and wearing an exquisitely embroidered dress of black crêpe over black sarsenet. Jet earrings dangled from her ears, and a single gold locket hung round her neck.

Sophia trembled as she went forward to be presented. After a shaky curtsy, she looked up to see piercing blue eyes anxiously assessing her.

‘It’s true? You really are James’ daughter?’ The dowager’s voice was firm, at odds with her frail appearance.

‘I believe so, my lady.’

‘Come closer, child. Let me look at you. Felicity, dear, pass me my *lorgnette*.’

Sophia moved nearer and submitted to the dowager’s scrutiny. Would she pass the test? And if she did, what then?

Bony fingers grasped Sophia’s arm, and the dowager led her to the sofa. She patted the seat next to her. ‘Sit down, child, and tell me about yourself.’

Sophia, haltingly at first, described her life with Mrs Archer. When she reached the part about Ruth Newbody, she fully expected to be turned out. She’d already decided that she wasn’t going to flinch from telling the complete truth about her past. None of it was her fault... And it was useless now to apportion blame. They would either accept her as she was, or she would carry on as before. Emmaline, God bless her, had assured her that she would still be welcome in her home.

To her joy, both ladies seemed remarkably willing to disregard her connections to the notorious Ruth Newbody.

‘Why, there are black sheep in every family,’ declared the dowager. ‘Only the other day, I was speaking with my friend the Dowager Viscountess Easterby. She has recently become acquainted with her grandson, a by-blow of her oldest son—’

‘Mama, really! I’m not sure Sophia or Mr Cullen wish to hear that story.’

Sophia smiled inwardly. It seemed that *haut-ton* society, whose disapprobation she’d feared, might not be the ogre she’d thought.

She looked over at Phil, who’d remained silent throughout, his quiet presence giving her the strength to tell her story. Her heart swelled with love. Where would she have been without him? He’d helped her from the start of their acquaintance, without knowing anything of her background. He was a true gentleman.

Her eyes widened as he raised a hand to gain the ladies’ attention. He announced that he, too, had further evidence, if needed, to corroborate her story. It seemed he’d been busy while he’d been in Oxfordshire, not only prying information out of Mrs Archer but also persuading that lady to part with Sophia’s parents’ marriage certificate and the record of her baptism, both of which Mrs Archer had kept hidden from Sophia. Sophia gasped. Was there no end to the woman’s mischief?

Sophia watched as Phil produced both documents with a flourish. He spread them out on a nearby table. For the first time, Sophia saw the names of her

parents written down: James Hart and Sophy Turner. A lump formed in her throat. Her parents.

Lady Hart spoke at last. 'Let me show you something.' The dowager fumbled at her locket, then gestured to her daughter. 'Felicity, dear, could you help?' Felicity came forward and, with deft fingers, opened the clasp.

'Look.' The dowager presented the open locket for Sophia to view.

Sophia leaned forward and saw a miniature of a young gentleman. His piercing blue eyes and chestnut hair told her everything. 'Is it..?'

Lady Hart nodded. 'Yes, that is James. It was all I had left of him... until now.' Tears started to fall down the dowager's cheeks, and her frail arms stretched out to envelop Sophia in a warm hug. It was several moments before either of them could speak.

'I have something too,' said Sophia. She reached into her reticule and brought out the small wooden box. Opening it carefully, she plucked out the tiny embossed button and placed it in Lady Hart's hand. Felicity peeped over her mother's shoulder.

'Mama, do you not recognise it? It is one of the buttons you commissioned for James' twenty-first birthday to go on the waistcoat I'd embroidered for him. Oh, goodness me.' Felicity looked back at Sophia. 'It was a joke on his name, you see? Hart. James thought it very funny.'

Sophia gazed at the button lying in the dowager's palm. If only she'd known... If only Mrs Archer had told her. She stifled her anger. It didn't matter now. She had discovered her family at last... her true family.



An hour or so later, Sophia was again seated beside Phil on the return journey to Great Pulteney Street. Her limbs were still trembling, and her head was in a complete whirl. Everything she had believed had been turned upside down. She had learned so much about her father, but more importantly, his family were not ashamed of her.

'What did I tell you? I knew they would love you... Just as I love you, Sophia.' Phil's words were said softly, but she heard them.

'Are you absolutely sure? I am not what you need, you know. You told me once you were not ready to marry and that you enjoyed your life of adventure too much to settle down... Besides, my background is far too scandalous, although not, it seems, for my own family. But that might not be the case with yours.' She was talking too quickly, but she loved him too much to allow him to give up the life he loved just because he thought he had an obligation to marry her. He had to be certain.

His jaw tightened, and he rapped on the roof and told the coachman to carry on up Great Pulteney Street and head for Sydney Gardens.

Her head spun round from the window to look at him. 'What? Why are we going there?'

'We need to talk,' he said tersely.

They alighted in silence, and linking her arm with his, he set off at a spanking pace through the park, his face set. They were going so fast she was becoming quite breathless.

'Where are we going?' This was all a bit ridiculous, she thought. There was no need for dramatics; she'd had enough drama to last a lifetime.

'One moment. I'm just looking for somewhere secluded... Ah, here we are.' He led her into a rose garden surrounded by high hedges. The roses were nearly finished; just a few overblown blooms remained, but their scent hung in the air.

He took her by the shoulders, the heat of his fingers burning through the fabric of her pelisse. Startled, she steeled herself to look him in the eye. Oh, how she wanted to melt into his arms, but she couldn't give in to her craven feelings.

'You really are the most infuriating female!'

'Pardon?' She hadn't expected that.

'I swear I will throttle you. When will you accept that I do not care about your background?' His eyes bored into hers. 'It is you as you are today, and tomorrow, and the next, that I care about. I've had enough heart-stopping moments for a lifetime.' He gave her a little shake. 'You've no idea how I felt when I thought you were dead... I wanted to die myself.'

She heard him take a breath, felt his fingers relax as his arms went round her.

'Sophia,' he whispered. 'Please tell me the truth. Do... Do you love me or not? If you do not love me, I will understand, and I will not bother you again. If you do love me, but you are intent on denying us a life together from a misguided notion that I do not want to settle down, admit it.'

'Are you sure?' Her voice wavered. She knew she had to tell him the truth.

'About what?' His voice was muffled; he was nuzzling into her hair. It would make a mess of her coiffure. Everyone would guess what she'd been doing... But she found she didn't mind.

'That you want to settle down?'

'Only with you, you widgeon. Besides, it won't be settling down. I'm sure you'll get into plenty of scrapes to keep me on my mettle.'

'You want the truth about my feelings?'

He tensed and pulled his head away from hers, apprehension in his eyes. 'Nothing but total honesty will do.'

'Total honesty?'

A nerve twitched in his cheek. 'Nothing less.'

'Phil, when I first met you, I thought you were the most overbearing of men. You spoke to me as if I were a halfwit, unable to proceed without a man's guidance.' She risked a glance at his face. He was chewing his lip. 'I thought you

were only pretending to like me because of your friendship with the Pridhams.'

He opened his mouth to speak, but she touched his lips with one finger to silence him. 'Let me finish.'

She took a breath. It was getting difficult to breathe, being this close to him, smelling his cologne, and seeing the pulse in his throat. Was his heart beating as fast as hers?

'I was mistaken in my beliefs. You were domineering at first because you were only trying to protect me. I would've been angry if I thought someone had deceived me, as you thought I had deceived you.' She smiled up at him. 'But I think we both know each other better now.' He nodded. 'You know I am not an addle-pated female, and I know you are not a gentleman who disregards opinions because they come from a female. You are true to your word. You are honourable. You have protected me – rescued me – several times.' Her cheeks were burning now. 'And I knew when we kissed that I could never love anyone but you.'

It was several minutes before she was able to speak again. His lips swooped down on hers, and suddenly she was transported back to the Pridhams' garden. The same glorious feeling of warmth, tenderness, and love.

All too soon it was over. Phil kept his arm around her as she tidied her hair. Goodness, who knew that one kiss could cause that much damage? At some point, her hat had come adrift, hanging by one ribbon from her neck. Phil's cravat was rather rumpled. His valet would not be pleased.

'So, you will marry me?' His eyes twinkled. 'You'll have to now; I've just compromised you, and you the granddaughter of a viscount.'

Sophia's heart was almost exploding with joy. 'I would be honoured to be your wife, Mr Cullen.' She sent him an arch smile. 'Shall we go and share our good news?'

He rolled his eyes.

'You forget, my love. They already believe we are to be married. No more pretend betrothal for us.'

Chapter 23



SOPHIA COULDN'T HELP SMILING over the rim of her glass. Sipping wine in her uncle's London drawing room, she was surrounded by her friends and family, and most important of all, Phil was by her side. Several weeks had passed since she'd been reunited with her father's relatives, and so much of import had happened since then. Best of all, she and Phil had been married that morning at St George's in Hanover Square, a venue that had been insisted upon by her grandmother.

'I was denied the chance to attend my son's wedding. I will not be denied the chance to attend his daughter's,' the dowager viscountess had said emphatically when, on their second visit, Sophia and Phil had told her that they had not yet set a date. Sophia recalled how, for all her outward frailty, her grandmother had gone on to organise all the details of the wedding, from the breakfast menu to the flowers and the musicians.

'Planning your wedding has given her a new lease of life,' Aunt Felicity had confided to Sophia on one of their innumerable trips to the fashionable dressmaker engaged to make her trousseau. Looking at her grandmother now, talking animatedly with her oldest son, the present Viscount Hart, her eyes sparkling, Sophia had to agree.

Viscount Hart, overjoyed at meeting his brother's daughter at last, had undertaken to pay for everything. It was the least he could do, he explained, to make up for the lost years Sophia had endured, separated from her family.

Well, Sophia decided, everything that had happened in the last couple of months had more than recompensed for all those lonely years. Indeed, she was sure she would never feel friendless or unloved ever again. Peering round the room at all the happy faces, so many new cousins and distant relatives, she felt it would be a struggle to remember all their names. But familiar faces were present too. Emmaline was over in the corner, chatting easily with Aunt Felicity. Over the hum of conversation, Admiral Pridham's voice could be heard, telling one of Viscount Hart's sons of his voyages while pointing at the large globe. Over there was Hannah, resplendent in a new bonnet, with the Reverend Simpson looking on fondly as she chatted to Phil's Uncle Ralph.

'I'll be glad when we can be on our own.' Phil's whispered words sent a tingle of anticipation down Sophia's spine.

She giggled, looking up into his face. 'Shh. Someone will hear you. But I know what you mean. I'll be glad when it's just the two of us. Between them – Grandmama, Emmaline, and Aunt Felicity – I've barely had a minute to think.'

His eyes creased into a smile. 'Uncle Ralph has been the same. Mind, it was good of him to rush straight here to make sure I was "properly turned out" as he put it. Took me to Weston's and even bullied Hoby into finishing my boots on time.' He rolled his eyes. 'That's the third pair I've had from him in under six months, by the way.'

Sophia saw a familiar figure approaching through the crush of bodies.

'Look, Lieutenant Ashdown is here.'

The gentleman bowed and took Sophia's hand. 'Just Ashdown now, Mrs Cullen.' He flashed a smile at Phil. 'Told you I was selling out.'

'Glad you made it in time, Ashdown. You promised to dance at my wedding, if I recall rightly,' said Phil with a grin.

'I did, didn't I? Just... I'm a bit fagged if the truth be known. Had a bit of a dash to get here.'

Sophia saw the quizzical look Phil sent him and guessed what it was about.

'You may speak freely, gentlemen. I know about my cousin's trial.' Whatever was happening in that quarter, she wasn't going to let it spoil her day.

Phil squeezed her hand. 'Yes, any news about that, Ashdown?'

Ashdown frowned. 'Just got back from the quarter sessions at Taunton. As expected, he is to be sent to Bristol for the Lenten assizes. It could be March before he stands.' Ashdown sent Sophia a sympathetic smile. 'Have no fear, Mrs Cullen. He is securely locked away. But truth to tell, I think it may be Bedlam, not the noose, that awaits him.'

'Still raving, is he?' It was Phil who asked the question. Sophia knew that her cousin had never been the same since he'd realised it was his misaimed shot that had killed his mother.

Ashdown nodded. 'Aye.'

Sophia wondered which was the worse fate: being hanged as a traitor or incarcerated for life in what were terrible conditions.

But before she could think on it for many seconds, another couple joined their small group. They'd been present in the church as she'd walked up the aisle on Phil's arm. Were they yet more cousins to whom she needed to be introduced? The gentleman was tall and dark-haired, while his partner was petite with a pretty, elfin face.

Phil pumped the gentleman's hand enthusiastically before bowing to the lady.

'Richard, it's good to see you after all this time. Mrs Lacey, your servant, ma'am.'

Richard Lacey grinned back at his friend. 'Well, we made all haste to get here. We were up in the Lakes when we received word, still on our own wedding trip. But I wasn't going to miss this event. I had to meet the young lady who'd managed to change your mind about marriage.' He bowed to Sophia and kissed her hand. 'You must be someone very special, my dear.' He shot an affectionate

glance at his lady. 'Just like my own dear Emma.'

His wife blushed. 'Enough, Richard, you're putting both Mrs Cullen and myself to the blush.' She flicked an astute glance at Ashdown before adding, 'And you're boring this gentleman.'

Ashdown stifled his yawn. 'Not at all, my dear lady.' He winked at Sophia. 'Ah, there's the admiral. Excuse me, I need a word.'

Sophia smiled as he sauntered off. 'I'm afraid Mr Ashdown will require rather more convincing before he settles down.'

Emma laughed. 'Indeed.' She leaned in. 'Now, may I call you Sophia, my dear? I would be delighted if you called me Emma. We are to be quite close neighbours when Richard and I eventually repair to our estate in the West Country. Though when that will be, I am not sure, as I do so enjoy travelling.' She cocked her head to one side. 'I understand your husband's estate is not far from Falmouth?'

'Yes, please do call me Sophia,' answered Sophia. 'And we will be living just a few miles from the coast near Falmouth.'

They chatted easily for several minutes, then it was time for Sophia and Phil to mingle with their other guests. After an hour of what seemed like endless congratulations and coy remarks that Sophia didn't quite understand, she was relieved when Phil took her arm and tugged her towards the door.

'Run upstairs and get changed. I'll meet you in the hall in fifteen minutes.' His eyes twinkled wickedly as he pointed her towards the stairs. 'Don't worry, your aunt's lady's maid is waiting to assist you. I've arranged everything.'

Sophia shook her head, laughing. 'I might've guessed.' She followed him quickly up the staircase, she to her room while he headed towards the room he'd been allocated for the day.

Fifteen minutes later, breathless with excitement, Sophia joined Phil at the front door. The carriage to take them on their journey back to Falmouth waited outside.

The door opened, and just as she took his arm there were laughing cries of 'There they are!' and 'Sneaking away!'

Sophia felt herself being bundled towards the coach by their well-wishing relatives. Phil, his face a picture of joy, grinned and waved his thanks as he grabbed her hand and helped her in. At last, the door slammed shut, and after final waves and shouts, they were off.

Heart beating a tattoo in her chest, Sophia turned to Phil. He put his arm around her and drew her to his chest.

'Alone at last,' he murmured, raining light kisses along her cheek. 'Do you remember the first time we were alone together like this?'

'How could I forget?' she answered. 'I was frightened and alone, and you were the first person in a long time who offered to help me.' She leaned back to look into the eyes of the man she loved. Her pulse raced at the intensity she saw there.

‘I pledged then to keep you safe, and it is a pledge I will never break. You are my life, Sophia.’

‘And I pledge to love you forever, Phil... Wherever life takes us and whatever the challenges ahead.’

The coach rolled on through the streets of London, its two occupants oblivious to the sights and sounds of the bustling city, focussed only on each other.

The End



Historical Notes



A Bachelor's Pledge is a work of fiction. However, a few real events and people did creep into my story. Governor Melvill was a real person, and what an eventful life he led! He was a soldier, a philanthropist, and a humanitarian, who did so much to improve the lives of the poor and disadvantaged in Falmouth. I couldn't write a book about Falmouth in this period and leave him out. His memoirs are freely available on Google Books.

The dreadful events on the packet ship **Princess Augusta** did take place, but in the year 1809, a little earlier than the events in my story.

About the Author



SOME TIME AGO PENNY Hampson decided to follow her passion for history by studying with the Open University. She graduated with honours and went on to complete a post-graduate degree.

Penny then landed her dream role, working in an environment where she was surrounded by rare books and historical manuscripts. Flash forward nineteen years, and the opportunity came along to indulge her other main passion – writing. Penny joined the New Writers’ Scheme of the RNA and three years later published her debut novel, *A Gentleman’s Promise*, a traditional Regency romance. Other books in the same genre soon followed.

But never happy in a rut, Penny also writes contemporary suspense with paranormal and romantic elements. Her first book in this genre is *The Unquiet Spirit*, published by Darkstroke.

Penny lives with her family in Oxfordshire, and when she is not writing, she enjoys reading, walking, swimming, and the odd gin and tonic (not all at the same time).

For more on Penny’s writing, visit her blog:

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